THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE THIRSTY:

DE-MYSTIFICATION IN THE POSTMODERN VAMPIRE FILM

by

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ABSTRACT

The predominance of romance, exoticism and mystical powers of the supernatural embodied onscreen by the character of the vampire has created both allure and apathy in viewers. While vampires have been portrayed in a large number of films since the early days of cinema, there has recently been a considerable modification in their depiction. Rather than the demons of *Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1922) and various other *Dracula* adaptations, or the romantic figures of *Interview with the Vampire* (Jordan, 1994), *Twilight* (Hardwicke, 2008), and even the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series (Whedon, 1997-2003), a selection of contemporary vampires are informed by a postmodern reconfiguration of the monster. This thesis examines the global and hybrid nature of these films by establishing a select group based on the character of the postmodern vampire. These postmodern vampires are sympathetic and de-mystified, exhibiting symptoms stemming from a natural illness or misfortune.

Over the course of this thesis, both narrative and stylistic patterns emerge, emphasizing the way these films stray from pre-established conventions of vampire films. This thesis first investigates onscreen portrayals of sympathetic female vampires through recurring depictions of melancholy and isolation in *The Addiction* (Ferrara, 1995), *Let The Right One In* (Alfredson, 2008), and *Trouble Every Day* (Denis, 2001), followed by the placement of South Korean film *Thirst* (2009) within Park Chan-wook's oeuvre as a filmmaker notorious for graphic depictions of violence and revenge, and finally the socio-political context of Hong Kong film *Mr. Vampire* (Lau, 1985), which reflects the growing tension of the state in the years leading up to its 1997 return to China. The portrayal of the vampire as a sympathetic figure allows for a shift away from the conventional focus on myth and the exotic, toward a renewed construction of the vampire in terms of its contribution to generic hybridization and cultural adaptation.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

There has recently been a representation of cinematic vampires that are void of (or, at the very least, lacking) supernatural, overly sentimental, and romanticized characteristics. Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction* (1995), Tomas Alfredson's *Let The Right One In* (2008), Claire Denis' *Trouble Every Day* (2001), Park Chan-wook's *Thirst* (2009), and Ricky Lau's *Mr. Vampire* (1985) are all a part of this trend, which will be the focus of the following chapters in this thesis. The academics, children, newly weds, and priests of these films are characterizations of vampires which differ from earlier depictions not only in their representation as the result of diseases or medical experiments rather than mythical associations, but also their placement within different national cinemas. These characters are the icons of a postmodern portrayal of the vampire proposed by this thesis. I have chosen to group these films together as a means of differentiating them from the many other contemporary vampire films which, still focusing on the core conventions of vampire narratives, present the vampire as a highly sexualized character, complimentary to recurring genres of romance, suspense, horror, and comedy. Over the course of this thesis, I will establish the key variations these films employ in their approaches to the vampire in order to provide an analysis of the functions and effects of this new representation, and situate this examination within the wider context of postmodern and genre film theory.

What are the implications of this portrayal of the vampire? What effect do these shifts in representation have? Is the postmodern vampire film a minor variation on the conventional vampire film or is it a unique reworking of its own kind? These central questions are dealt

with over the course of this thesis, taking into account films from American, Swedish, French, Korean, and Hong Kong cinemas. The attempt to find answers to these questions suggests the possibility of reconstructing previously determined trends, such as the dominant generic structures of the traditional vampire film, as well as the separation of Eastern and Western traditions. In showing a vampire protagonist that views his or her condition as a struggle, or an illness, rather than a virtue, the shift in representation becomes more than a revision of previous narratives, marking something different altogether. This phenomenon allows for a reevaluation of the use of the vampire as a metaphor for cultural concerns and, as the films analyzed in this thesis suggest, begins to shed light on different interpretations of the vampire narrative as more than a simple love story with implicit references to addiction or sexuality.

The function of this introductory chapter is to outline the prominent existing scholarship regarding representations of the vampire onscreen and to construct a methodological model using genre, cultural, and postmodern theory. The initial purpose of this methodology is to show that a postmodern vampire has emerged out of the current vampire craze. The films I have grouped together are more critical and self-reflexive, offering representations of the vampire that are simultaneously aware of and uninterested in previous incarnations of the vampire figure. Although they represent a shift away from conventional vampire portrayals, they do rely heavily on the influence of previously established conventions of the vampire, stemming from century-old British literature, such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872). The three characteristics that have had the greatest influence on these revised representations of the vampire are: the portrayal of the vampire as a mythical creature with supernatural powers,

the vampire's traditional presence in the horror film, and the depiction of the vampire as a romantic figure. The following section lays out the dominant films and relevant scholarship with reference to these three main traits in order to establish what has been written by other scholars about certain theories of the vampire. From there, I will propose some unique characteristics of the postmodern adaptation.

PRECEDENTS

The past century has seen countless reinventions of the vampire myth onscreen, occurring across several genres and in various countries. Films featuring vampires show them as both protagonists and antagonists, in horrifying, romantic, and even comedic lights. Recently, however, cinematic vampire representations have split into two different streams, one remaining relatively true to the traditional narrative, and the other offering an interpretation of the vampire as a less mystical figure. The films in this latter strand have certain common characteristics, despite distinctly different stylistic and narrative traits, which I find to be defining features of the postmodern vampire film. Still drawing inspiration from myths about those who survive on human blood, the postmodern vampire film tends to show a less sexualized depiction of the vampiric attack, especially in cases where the vampire does not prey on its victims with the intention to 'turn' them. Both frustration and shame are attached to the resulting acts of these characters after they have been infected, much unlike the vampire figures of other contemporary films that remain true to the traditional narrative. Films such as *The Lost Boys* (Schumacher, 1987), and *Blade* (Norrington, 1998) instead portray vampires who maintain a certain sense of pride in their diversity. For example, in *Metamorphoses of the Vampire in Literature and Film*, Erik Butler suggests the hazing of new members entering *The Lost Boys'* teenage gang of vampires is much like that of a

college fraternity (182), emphasizing the bonding experience of vampirism, rather than an isolated one. Instead of adapting these traits from the established vampire characters of the typical genres (horror, romance), postmodern vampires often exhibit similar qualities to characters from less conventional (sub)genres, such as kung fu (*Mr. Vampire*) or philosophical art (*The Addiction*) films. Other alternative subgenres incorporating the vampire narrative include blaxploitation (*Ganja and Hess* [Gunn, 1973], *Blacula* [Crain, 1972]), erotic (lesbian) films (*Vampyros Lesbos* [Franco, 1971], *Daughters of Darkness* [Kumel, 1971]), and science-fiction/anime (*Vampire Hunter D* [Ashida, 1985]).

Postmodern vampire films, however, set themselves apart by suggesting a new direction for their more diverse characters. Distinguished by a less exotic/erotic protagonist whose role in the film has more weight to it than merely as a bloodsucker (for example, Sang-hyun as a Catholic priest in *Thirst*, Kathleen as an NYU PhD candidate in *The Addiction*, or even the Chinese vampire as a cultural signifier within Hong Kong cinema). The observed group of films also demonstrates a shift away from the traditional vampire narrative through their abandonment of many of the cliché conventions; while most of them maintain the inability to enter direct sunlight for the purpose of the narrative (Kathleen's character appears even darker because of her sunglasses, Sang-hyun's martyrdom is emphasized by his decision to roast in the sun, and the sadness of Eli's situation in *Let the Right One In* is highlighted by her little nest in the bathroom), many other conventions are abandoned (none of the vampires in question bear fangs or wear a cape, nor do they have any resistance to garlic or the cross). These normalized vampires reflect what Meg Barker refers to as the "*real vampire*" in her essay "Vampire Subcultures." Differentiating them from "*vampire fans," "vampire role-players," and "blood fetishists,"* Barker describes 'real

vampires' as part of "an expanding group who identify as vampires due to their common experience of a thirst for blood, often accompanied by sensitivity to sunlight and nocturnal tendencies" (109). Although Barker's focus is on non-fiction accounts rather than fictional filmic portrayals, the onscreen depictions of these 'real vampires' also merit analysis. In order to do so, I will contextualize what I have labeled the postmodern vampire film in terms of precedent variations (introduced above) and expand upon their relationship to a global postmodern context.

Myth of the Living Dead: Implications of the Supernatural Vampire

As a mythical creature, the vampire is widely recognized by its appearance. However, as Peter Day points out in his introduction to *Vampires: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, "if the 'look' of the vampire was popularly defined by default film images of fangs, capes, and evening wear[,] the nature and character of vampires was still free to adapt and evolve" (xi). Expanding from the Dracula myth, a list of conventions began to be established by the earliest adaptations, with contributions continuing to be made by the more contemporary ones. While vampires have been sleeping in coffins and showing no reflection in mirrors since the earliest envisioning of Dracula in 1897, more recent additions, such as Edward Cullen's skin sparkling in the sunlight in *Twilight* (Hardwicke, 2008), have attracted so much attention that it will be no surprise if future vampires boast similar qualities. Tim Kane, defining the vampire film as a subgenre of horror, highlights the evolutionary changes of the genre by listing several different features we have come to associate with the vampire (cape, fangs, malevolent gaze): "The expectation for the vampire in horror cinema has evolved from Bela Legosi in *Dracula* to Kate Beckinsale in *Underworld*, from villain to

hero" (3). This has become the subject of much discussion as theorists debate the relevance

of the evolution of the vampire over the past century.

In *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, one of Andrew Tudor's methods of interpreting the

horror film is by distinguishing between supernatural and secular monsters. Although he sets

the two up as polar opposites for the purpose of his study, he does recognize that "some

narratives hinge on an ambiguity about precisely this distinction, while others may seek to

create tension by treating a notionally secular threat as if it were an instance of the

supernatural" (9). The blur between secular and supernatural is at the forefront of the

postmodern vampire narrative, though Tudor's analysis does not dwell much on this

ambiguous alternative monster, noting that in most cases it is fairly easy to distinguish

between the two. Tudor's classification of the vampire as supernatural, external and

autonomous (as outsiders, not created by humans), however, is distinctly different from the

portrayals seen in several of the postmodern films in question. For example, neither Kathy in

The Addiction, nor Coré in *Trouble Every Day* exhibits any supernatural qualities – they are

presented as human beings who survive on blood. Meanwhile, Sang-hyun's disease in *Thirst*

is very much a product of human experiment (much like the "mad scientist's abomination",

which Tudor considers to be a threat dependent (as opposed to autonomous) on human

volition [Tudor 10]) and the hopping vampires in *Mr. Vampire* are presented as human

corpses that have not yet settled into death, rather than an external force such as the "space

monster." In this sense, Tudor's "variations of the horror-movie threat" are very much reliant

on the modern conception of the vampire, one that existed prior to reconceived narratives and

generic mixing.

Thus, when vampire films begin to work outside the boundaries of the traditional Dracula narrative and horror genre, the ambiguities that surface force us to reconsider aspects of horror/vampire films that were once more overtly defined, such as the binary of good and evil. Nearly every adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* either epitomizes or questions this relationship, using the differences between human and supernatural to draw attention to portrayals of 'normal' and 'deviant' characters. In early films such as F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*, this distinction is clear through the horridness of the Dracula figure, never evoking any question of which characters are good or bad throughout the film. Though the campiness of the Hammer Horror portrayals of Dracula suggests a mocking of the original characterization, in his book *Hammer and Beyond*, Peter Hutchings notes how the "robust physicality" of Hammer films leads to "an insistence on the solid and corporeal nature of the conflict between the forces of good and evil" (57). He suggests that this physicality is highlighted by both the settings and the style of these films, such as the castles where "various acts of violence are rendered even more striking than they would be otherwise" (58). Hutchings also acknowledges Van Helsing's overt claim in *Horror of Dracula* (Fisher, 1958) that the crucifix symbolizes "'the power of good over evil'" (60).

Later vampire films, however, begin to reconsider this distinction by presenting a more ambiguous take on the separation of good and evil. Gregory Desilet and Cynthia Freeland both note the grey area in vampire subgenres that, moving away from the classical horror portrayal, refrain from depicting the monster "as a specter of unremitting evil" (Desilet 56). In her article, "The X-Files and Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Ambiguity of Evil in Supernatural Representations," Beth Braun pays close attention to the newer representations of the supernatural, which offer a certain sense of moral ambiguity through

the relations of characters traditionally considered 'good' or 'bad.' She interprets Angel's character in the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon, 1997-2003) to have shifted from bad to good because of sex, and uses psychoanalytic theory to explain why this change is acceptable to Buffy. Applying Melanie Klein's theory that babies separate their mothers into "good" and "bad" categories, so as to justify the times when their beloved nurturer is not 'perfect,' Braun proposes: "So the character of Buffy, mirroring the infant's dilemma, was forced to come to terms with the fact that her perfect lover also embodied great hostility and rage targeted toward her" (91). While still recognizing the differences between good and evil, the justification of the supernatural being's evil tendencies marks a movement toward a more sympathetic vampire figure, through characters like Angel, and even later interpretations of Dracula (as adapted in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* [Coppola, 1992] for example).

Despite the consistent portrayal of the supernatural in numerous contemporary examples of the traditional vampire narrative, the postmodern vampire film relies less heavily on the portrayal of these special powers, often eliminating them altogether. In doing so, this distinction between good and evil becomes even less relevant. Instead of being overly preoccupied with this dichotomy, the films in this group tend to avoid trying to justify the position of characters exhibiting evil qualities. Regardless of whether their characters are deemed good or bad, these films are more interested in issues such as loyalty, religion, and even greater philosophical musings such as that of human existence. This is not to say each film does not have its own sympathetic characters, but merely suggests that our reading should not be dictated by subjective interpretations of who or what is good or bad. The

excision of the supernatural implies a less directed focus on the myth of the vampire, instead looking at the more general implications of their roles as creatures of the night.

Dread of the Living Dead: The Vampire and the Horror Film

Another major change that has affected the traditional vampire narrative is its generic classification. For many years, the vampire film was exclusively associated with the horror genre and, in many cases, it still is. James Twitchell's influential work on the horror film, *Dreadful Pleasures*, reinforces the crucial bond between horror and the vampire, citing it as one of the three archetypal stories for horror tales, alongside the Frankenstein monster and the transformation monster (7). Twitchell marks the differing portrayals of the vampire as an indication of its universal implications, pointing out:

> We are currently plagued by two vampires. The emaciated snaggle-toothed fiend, who is straight from folklore, is feral, mindless, and barbaric; the foppish gentleman, who is from the arts, is articulate, sensitive, and cultured. They both dedicate their waking hours to the same activity—draining blood and hence the life energy of innocent women. (105)

Regardless of their appearance, vampires are associated with horror because of their intentions. In this multiplicity, it is the audience's fear of what this figure represents to them – plague, death, even seduction – that has consistently drawn them to the cinema to observe it.

Twitchell is not alone in his endeavor to reveal this connection. Rather, he is amongst numerous writers on the horror film who note the psychological implications of our fascination with being scared. Barry Langford recognizes the ambivalence of horror, noting

the duality of its ability to unmask latent desires while simultaneously re-suppressing the protagonist (and, through it, the viewer) with the concluding destruction of the 'monster' (159), while D.L. White connects our fear of death with our attraction to witnessing it (131). The vampire film epitomizes this fascination by portraying a monster that is simultaneously horrifying and mysteriously alluring. Thus, despite its long-time association with conventional horror films, even the earliest depictions of cinematic vampires were already beginning to touch upon a wide variety of generic conventions ranging from comedy to action to romance and beyond.

<u>Passion of the Living Dead: Evolution of the Romantic Vampire</u>

Twitchell's connection between horror and desire offers one explanation for the vampire film's shift into more overt portrayals of romance. He suggests three reasons for our fascination with horror: "(1) as counterphobia or the satisfaction of overcoming objects of fear; (2) as 'the return of the repressed' or the compulsive projection of objects of sublimated desire; and (3) as part of a more complicated rite of passage from onanism to reproductive sexuality" (65). Adding to the recognition of the audience's role in reading the vampire, Cynthia A. Freeland points out the significance of the changing portrayals through the vampire's performers: "Bela Legosi's performance in Tod Browning's film version of *Dracula* was crucial in transforming Bram Stoker's villain into an erotically compelling figure. Yet this Dracula is still depicted as evil and in some ways repulsive" (128). This revolting yet compelling figure was echoed for several decades to follow, adapted both seriously and parodically in films such as *Horror of Dracula* and *Nosferatu the Vampyr* (Herzog, 1979).

Still, Martina G. Luke argues, the romantic presence is noteworthy. In her essay "*Nosferatu the Vampyr* (1979) as a Legacy of Romanticism," she notes: "the legacy of Romanticism can be seen in *Nosferatu the Vampyr* in themes such as the conflicts of the individual and society, love and death, sanity and insanity, dream and reality, as well as in the setting or the use of music" (153). Focusing on style over narrative attributes, Luke's interpretation of Romanticism in Herzog's film has little to do with a romantic or a sexual relationship with the vampire. Instead, she refers to Herzog's themes of self-destruction and feelings of futility, contributing to, she argues, the film's aesthetic beauty. This interpretation helps to explain the audience fascination with this film, despite being based on a story everyone has heard before. Nevertheless, Luke does include love as one of the many Romantic traditions, citing the relationship between Lucy and Jonathan in *Nosferatu the Vampyr* as an example of love "as one of the most powerful and noble emotions imaginable" (155). In this sense, the film remains true to the traditional vampire narrative in its depiction of the perspective of the human, ultimately reestablishing order with the restoration of heterosexual, human romance at the conclusion.

Despite the Romantic style discussed by Luke, it was not until the perspective of the vampire was introduced in films such as *The Hunger* (Scott, 1983) and *Interview with the Vampire* (Jordan, 1994) that romance between a vampire and a human began to be portrayed as acceptable. In his article, "Cruising the Alternatives: Homoeroticism and the Contemporary Vampire," Andrew Schopp argues that the transformation of the vampire "from a feared cultural phenomenon to a desired cultural product […] culminated in the contemporary vampire product, which provides a space for articulating and reconstructing cultural desires" (231). This was the beginning of a more sympathetic vampire. In these films

we begin to see vampires as the protagonists of the stories, allowing the audience to consider

the position of the unwilling victim, struggling to deal with sudden urges to consume human

blood. This is one of the earlier influences on the postmodern vampire film, which also

focuses on the perspective of the vampire as a sympathetic creature, though the latter

portrayals tend to be significantly less sentimental. While the audience is encouraged to feel

for vampires like Louis in *Interview* or Miriam in *The Hunger* in their longing for normality,

vampires of the postmodern type are shown struggling in a way that is less appealing to our

emotions. Even with the return to the perspective of the human in more recent films like

Twilight, we are still presented with an excessively romantic vampire figure – one that is at

the human protagonist's beck and call, promising to protect her from himself and all other

supernatural creatures.

However, while John L. Flynn, in *Cinematic Vampires* points out: "the words

vampire and Dracula have become synonymous with sexual seduction, power, and

domination, and are integral parts of our daily vocabulary" (1), we see this portrayed in

alternative ways through the depiction of the vampire's internal struggle between being

passively romantic and aggressively violent. This observation is even less accurate in the

case of the postmodern vampire. These films do not ask for its audience's pity, but instead

focus on the more realistic suggestion that this situation is not as far-fetched as one might

think. By exposing the thirst for human blood as the result of a medical experiment, or a

random attack on the street, rather than attempting to naturalize the existence of 'real'

vampires amongst us, this group of films avoids relying on ancient mythology in order to

justify itself.

Perhaps most influential to this shift were a selection of vampire films released in the seventies and eighties, which Flynn notes:

> [came] in an age which had rejected most religious and supernatural beliefs in favour of science and technology[;] the vampire was no longer simply a night stalker. In films like *Martin* (1978), *The Keep* (1983), and *Lifeforce – the Space Vampires* (1985), he had become a maniacal psychotic looking to drain not only blood, but the entire soul from his victims. (6)

While *Martin* (Romero, 1978) and these other films may be viewed as a precursor to the postmodern vampire film, it is still highly aware of the conventions of the traditional vampire, more of a direct reworking than the films I have grouped together, which generally avoid preoccupation with what a vampire film is 'supposed to' be. Flynn continues: "Rejecting all the trappings that had made vampire films passé, Romero reconsidered what had made the classics like *Nosferatu* (1922), *Vampyr* (1932), and *The Vampire Bat* (1933) so popular and restored the terror and menace of the vampire which had been missing from so many contemporary films" (244). Flynn's work calls attention to the movement away from the mythical vampire by considering alternative portrayals across various genres, which has been useful in constructing a methodology that builds from his interpretations of earlier vampire films (up to 1992), prior to the postmodern revisions.

ESTABLISHING THE POSTMODERN VAMPIRE

One of the most important features separating postmodern representations of the vampire from other characterizations is the ambiguity in the films' messages. In its shift from the classic allegories of plague, sexuality, and addiction, the postmodern vampire film

distinguishes itself from the traditional vampire narrative and other representations of current

societal fears. Fredric Jameson's influential essay, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,"

reinforces the futility of trying to apply a single metaphor or theory to a body of work. Using

Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) as an example, Jameson argues that our desire to impose

some sort of symbolism on the shark distracts us from its real purpose, which is to lay the

foundation for facing several different social and class conflicts connecting the primary

characters of the film. Without declaring any interpretation of the shark erroneous, Jameson

instead proposes that its presence forces us to focus too much on its metaphors and ultimately

overlook the greater purpose of the film. He notes, "as a symbolic vehicle, then, the shark

must be understood in terms of its essentially polysemous function rather than any particular

content attributable to it by this or that spectator" (35). Jameson's postmodern perspective

insists that there is not one single message being presented, but a multitude, open for

interpretation. The postmodern film, then, similarly denies the possibility of one overarching

moral but, rather, offers a narrative saturated with ambiguity and inconclusiveness.

As is the case with Jameson's reading of *Jaws*' cinematic shark, the cinematic

vampire should not be read exclusively as a metaphor for AIDS, addiction, sexuality, or any

other individual concern. Instead of focusing on a specific representation, the postmodern

vampire serves as a pretext for the consideration of various issues, with more specific

physical and psychological hesitations tending to come at the forefront, rather than the

greater societal concerns of earlier depictions. The multiplicity of this revised narrative

suggests that the vampire's purpose is not to symbolize a simple message, but act as the

connection between many. As Andrew Schopp points out: "the vampire has become more

than simply an archetype of some static cultural desire and fear; it now constitutes a mirror

that reflects shifting cultural desires and fears" (232). *The Addiction*, for example, offers a renewed interpretation of the vampire narrative because Kathleen, as the vampire figure, brings together issues of collectivity, addiction, and existential crisis through its extensive philosophical musings.

However, in the introduction to his book *Postmodern Hollywood*, M. Keith Booker suggests that over-ambiguous narratives often inspire a lifelessness that ends up "attribut[ing] to a half-heartedness that results from a lack of faith in the viability of *any* messages" (xiv). He does, however, follow this up with recognition of a potentially positive outcome of postmodernism, adding: "this distrust of totalizing metanarratives has led to a strong tendency toward pluralism in postmodern thought, which in the aesthetic realm often leads to the production of works that participate in multiple genres and styles within a single work" (xiv). In the case of the postmodern vampire film, this means moving away from the repetitive reiterations of classical horror imagery (the dark castle filled with bats) and reaction shots (with the camera alternating between horrific images and the protagonists' horrified expressions). Furthermore, whether it is presented through the genre of horror, action, comedy, or romance genre, conventional vampire films' typically select a single metaphor for the vampire, deliver a single goal that results in a single moral, and leave little room for diverse interpretation.

Jameson's postmodern solution for the redundancy and monism of genre film is to avoid seeking comfort within the cinema, interpreting the use of genre in mass culture as a similar indication of the desire for familiarity through repetition. Just as audiences tend to seek reflection of their individual beliefs and fears through onscreen allegory, genre films offer a similar sense of expectation: "the atomized or serial 'public' of mass culture wants to

see the same things over and over again, hence the urgency of generic structure and the generic signal" (25). This observation asks us to question our reliance on the ability to recognize signifiers, urging us to instead step out of our comfort zones and refrain from relying on generic devices to inform us of a film's worth.

Rick Altman's extensive work on film genre offers an optimistic solution to the postmodernist distaste for totalizing discourse by highlighting the value of genre evolution and hybridity. What happens when genres begin to evolve, becoming more sporadic, less predictable? Do audiences lose their trust and, thus, their interest? Or does spectatorship increase, with audiences desperate to make new connections, to hold on to their once reliable form of classification? Altman questions the traditionally supported belief that, in the process of genre evolution, a film builds on earlier films of a single genre. Instead, in *Film/Genre*, he argues that mixing has always been an essential part of genre film, making it difficult for any film to be placed in a single category. Equally welcomed by the postmodern perspective is the acknowledgement of subgenres, which further distance film classifications from such broad classical genres as the western, musical, and gangster film. Subgenres can also be broken down into their own hybrids, such as the disaster film, stemming from both action and science fiction, or the road film, derived from the action, western, comedy, and gangster genres.

In another more positive consideration of the value of generic mixing, Gregory Waller asserts: "The pleasures of familiarity, however, must be understood in relation to the pleasures of originality, for the generic text always involves variation as well as standardization, innovation as well as convention" (8). This suggests a potential for the co-existence of postmodern thought and genre theory in its acknowledgement of the variation

and innovation existent in generic evolution. This is particularly relevant to the study of the postmodern vampire film because, rather than reading the shift from traditional to postmodern narratives as an example of generic evolution, it is necessary to instead consider the development of subgenres and hybrids as a means of addressing evolving subject matter, such as the revised envisionings of the vampire figure. While texts such as Tim Kane's *The Changing Vampire of Film and Television* seek to determine how the vampire film has changed (or, perhaps, remained true) as a genre over seventy years of adaptations, I consider the vampire film, though traditionally associated with the horror genre, to be more easily recognized as a myth crossing over various genres and subgenres, warranting its own interpretations beyond generic classifications.

IMPLICATIONS

Over the course of this thesis, I will deal closely with the structural and functional concepts outlined above in order to justify my grouping of these select films as unique, de-mystified reworkings of the vampire tradition. Beginning in Chapter 2 with a close analysis of the excision of the supernatural in *The Addiction*, *Let The Right One In*, and *Trouble Every Day*, I focus on the de-mystification of the vampire in these films with their lack of reliance on earlier depictions, such as the mythological pretext or even horror or romance conventions. While these films have an undeniable awareness of preconceived notions of the vampire (such as sensitivity to light), they are more preoccupied with the psychological implications of vampirism as an illness than making reference to any of their precursors. Their emphasis on the burden of vampirism takes away from the conventional vampire perks such as sex appeal and special powers. Chapter 3 takes an auteurist approach to analyze the implications of *Thirst* as Park Chan-wook's most recent film. While Park is infamous for

making revenge films depicting stylishly graphic violence, his undertaking of a vampire film allows for a complex balance between narrative and visuals through his focus on the Western implications of this myth within Korean cinema. Furthermore, the combination of international references and traditional Korean culture marks it as highly conscious of New Korean Cinema's focus on globalization. Finally, in Chapter 4, I deal with a much more specific representation of the vampire through Chinese mythology in the *Mr. Vampire* series of the 1980s. The portrayal of the *jiang shi* within Hong Kong cinema marks a unique hybrid of Eastern and Western traditions, highly aware of the Special Administrative Region's (SAR) own situation, in many ways caught between the two. While this final example, through its use of Chinese mythology, suggests a shift back to earlier portrayals of vampires in the horror films of the West, its overt preoccupation with the blending of different genres and mixed messages marks it as an early contribution to the postmodern vampire film. Through their elimination of the sexual allure and mystery of the traditional vampire narrative, these films urge the spectator to critically examine their differences as part of a recent global and cultural phenomenon.

CHAPTER 2:

SYMPATHY FOR MRS. VAMPIRE

Melancholy, Isolation, and the Female Bloodsucker

The past century has seen the vampire film evolve from direct adaptations of Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* to entirely transformed myths depicting bloodsuckers ranging from seemingly innocent children, to sexy (sometimes even sparkly) young men, to exoticized lesbians. One of the most significant changes during this evolution is the shift from portrayals of the vampire as a villain to the vampire as a sympathetic creature. Though readings of early vampire narratives interpret the monstrous images of the undead consuming the living to represent societal fear of the Black Death,[1] the vampire now stands for countless concerns including addiction, social alienation, and sexuality. Equally noteworthy is the shift in the protagonist viewpoint: while films following the original Dracula narrative tend to align the spectator's gaze with the male vampire, objectifying the beautiful female victim or Dracula's erotic female 'children,' recent vampire films offer the perspective of the female protagonist, gazing at a sexually alluring male vampire. While portrayals range from the German Expressionist horror of *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau) in 1922 to the spoof comedy of *Vampires Suck* (Friedberg and Seltzer) in 2010, these films and the majority released over the

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[1] In *Dread: How Fear and Fantasy Have Fueled Epidemics From the Black Death to Avian Flu*, Philip Alcabes notes: "at almost the same time as Murnau was filming the plague-carrying vampire rising out of a rat-infested ship's hold to spread disease, public-health authorities were using scientific knowledge to curtail real plague epidemics in Paris and Los Angeles" (2).

ninety years in between all continue to be informed by the classical conventions laid out by Stoker and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 novella *Carmilla*.

On the contrary, films like *The Addiction* (Ferrara, 1995), *Let the Right One In* (Alfredson, 2009) and *Trouble Every Day* (Denis, 2001), though still aware of these conventions, move away from portrayals of the vampire as a supernatural being and focus more closely on their female bloodsuckers as sympathetic, yet not overly sentimental, characters. In doing so, these films reveal de-romanticized, de-mystified vampires who demonstrate signs of vampirism as an illness, the result of an unfortunate, and often unexplained, circumstance. This female postmodern vampire is neither exotic nor envied, proud nor pitied, bringing to the forefront issues of alienation, which ultimately provoke sympathy for the vampire through their onscreen depictions of melancholy and isolation. A brief consideration of the postmodern pre-cursor – the romantic, mysterious/mythical vampire – will set up the subsequent analysis of how these new sympathetic vampires offer a new perspective on the vampire narrative. This is seen through the reinterpretation of the female vampire protagonist as either a non-sexual being (Kathleen in *The Addiction*, Eli in *Let The Right One In*) or a means of reversing the depiction of onscreen sex, so that the female perspective offers a unique focus on the naked male body (Coré in *Trouble Every Day*).

According to Frank Lafond in *The Cinema of Tod Browning*, in contrast to F.W. Murnau's early vampire film, *Nosferatu*, which "insists upon the vampire's physical abjection," Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931) aims to present the vampire figure as "an irresistible seducer" (154). This shift, in just over a decade between the two films, marks a new portrayal of the bloodsucking creature, which would be carried on for the century to

come. Since the release of Browning's film in 1931, the vampire figure has evolved into something significantly more sexual than Murnau's Count Orlok (Max Schreck). In addition to Bela Lugosi's Eastern European accent, unfamiliar to American audiences, his character is presented in Browning's film as an attractive aristocrat who manages to appeal to both men and women. The exoticized vampire is even more prominent in films to follow, as both male and female vampires fill the role of the sexual seducer. Tim Kane notes: "The erotic [vampire] film cycle began May 8, 1957, with the American release of *Horror of Dracula*," followed by films such as *Sex and the Vampire* (1970), *Lust for a Vampire* (1970), and *Lesbian Vampires* (1970), all of which portrayed victims welcoming, rather than fearing, the vampire's bite (43-44). In the 1980s, gender and sexuality began to be presented in a new light within the vampire film. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Kuzui, 1992) focuses on a dominating female teenager (Kristy Swanson) who is resistant to any appeal the vampire may have, eventually taking pride in her task as the designated slayer. Still, despite their variations on the initial portrayal of Dracula as an unsightly figure, both *Buffy* and Tod Browning's *Dracula* remain consistent in their familiar depiction of the main characters studying the traditions of the vampire in order to learn how to deal with them (Waller 8). This aspect, however, only exists when the film focuses on the vampire hunters. Later films, straying from the classic *Dracula* narrative, are forced to convey the vampire conventions in diverse ways, as the focus shifts to the perspective of the vampires themselves in films such as *Interview with the Vampire* (Jordan, 1994).

Although Candice R. Benefiel admits that *Interview with the Vampire* may not necessarily have portrayed the first sympathetic vampires, she suggests they were likely the first successful ones (261). While *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was released two years prior to

Interview, it was not until the second season of the television series (Whedon, 1997-2003) that Angel (David Boreanaz) was introduced as a sympathetic figure. In the meantime, *Interview*'s focus on the vampire's side of the story offered a unique re-telling of the traditional narrative. Though following many of the same vampire conventions as Stoker's novel, Jordan's film puts a greater emphasis on familial relations,[2] portraying both the hardships and the intense bonding of its vampire protagonists. More recently, the *Twilight* franchise[3] has once again returned the perspective to the human being, but still portrays the sympathetic family bond of a group of "good" vampires. Rather than trying to eliminate vampires for the greater good of society, as Buffy (Sarah Michelle Geller) does, *Twilight*'s protagonist, Bella (Kristen Stewart), takes more interest in personal endeavors, openly expressing her romantic interest in the "vegetarian" vampire Edward Cullen (Robert Pattinson) early in the film. *Twilight* focuses on the romantic exchanges between Bella and Edward and the supernatural powers of both good and bad vampires, marking a significant shift from the early days of *Nosferatu* and *Dracula* when the vampire only represented evil. Rather than functioning as an evolution from bad vampires to good vampires, however, this brief overview of the variations on the traditional narrative suggest that the evolution of the vampire is more of a mixing of different conventions than a simple progression from one type to the next.

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[2] Benefiel references Anne Rice's biographer who reveals that writing *Interview with the Vampire* was Rice's way of dealing with the loss of her daughter to leukemia. Benefiel suggests that her near-breakdown is represented by a character in the novel – "an insane Parisian dollmaker who yearns obsessively for her own dead daughter" (266).
[3] Currently comprised of *Twilight* (Hardwicke, 2008), *New Moon* (Weitz, 2009), *Eclipse* (Slade, 2010), with the two-part *Breaking Dawn,* directed by Bill Condon, expected to be released in 2011 (part one) and 2012 (part two).

Still, despite their remarkable differences, all of these films can be further contrasted with a small group of vampire films released over the past couple of decades in which vampire clichés are replaced by depictions of melancholy and isolation to concentrate on sympathetic female vampires, exhibiting little or no supernatural power. In *The Addiction*, *Let the Right One In*, and *Trouble Every Day*, sympathy for the vampire can be partially attributed to the fact that all three films depict female protagonists in their struggle with social alienation. While female vampires have been portrayed since the early days of vampire literature in stories such as *Carmilla*, it is rare to find a female vampire protagonist not depicted (and exoticised) as a lesbian. Nonetheless, the sympathetic vampire dates back to nineteenth century literature; as Andrea Weiss points out in *Vampires and Violets*, Carmilla "is characterized sympathetically in that she acts out of compulsion rather than malice" (87). She observes, however, that what is used from the original story in filmic adaptations such as *The Vampire Lovers* (Baker, 1970) is not the sympathetic portrayal, but merely the lesbianism, "reworked into a male pornographic fantasy" (ibid). In this sense, while the three films in question may draw their sympathetic females from LeFanu's text, in each case she has been considerably reconstructed as a normalized, heterosexual vampire. While the postmodern female vampire is much like her predecessor in her "threat of violence as well as of sexuality" (Weiss 93), she is no longer depicted as the one taking pleasure in her violent/sexual acts, instead demonstrating melancholia as a result of the isolating nature of her disease and position within society. *The Addiction* is perhaps the most explicit of the three in questioning the position of its female protagonist, as she contemplates the nature of her existence throughout the film.

Opening with a slideshow of stills from Vietnam and the My Lai Massacre in 1968, *The Addiction* reflects on a number of historical events through the eyes of philosophy PhD candidate Kathleen, who is taking a course on morality at New York University. The film takes place on and around the NYU campus and Kathleen's story of addiction is frequently intercut with images of the bustling streets of New York City, as well as still photographs of tragic events like My Lai and the Holocaust. Although the term vampire is never actually used within the film, what follows is a series of events that would be easily recognized by most viewers as the transformation into vampirism: Kathleen is pulled into an alleyway by a mysterious woman in black, bitten on the neck and left with an aggressive-looking wound that an unconcerned police officer dismisses as the result of an everyday street attack. When Kathleen winds up back in the hospital after vomiting blood at school, the doctor insists she is merely suffering from some kind of "chronic anemia." The film continues as Kathleen makes various attempts to satisfy her thirst for blood, her victims ranging from random strangers on the street to her professor (Paul Caulderon) and her friend, Jean (Edie Falco). Kathleen's addiction initially distracts her from her academic pursuit, but she eventually finds herself enlightened after meeting Peina (Christopher Walken), who forces her to resist the temptations of feeding, allowing her to sink deep into withdrawal. Inspired, like many writers before her,[4] by the different stages of addiction, Kathleen completes her dissertation and holds a party to celebrate her successful defense. While all of her victims seem to have disappeared following her attacks throughout the film, they, strangers and friends alike, suddenly return at this celebration as Kathleen's 'children' to participate in a violent orgy-

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[4] Peina refers to writers like William S. Burrows whose writing has been influenced by withdrawal: "Have you read *Naked Lunch*? Burrows perfectly describes what it's like to go without a fix."

like, bloodbath of an attack where all the vampires drain those guests who are deemed less 'enlightened.'

While the film's portrayal of the vampire's transformation and resulting desire for blood is reflective of its numerous predecessors, several aspects of *The Addiction* challenge the conventions of the vampire film. One of its most significant variations on these conventions is its layered approach to the allegories being presented. While readings of earlier films tend to focus on the vampire as a metaphor for a single concern, *The Addiction* deals with several issues simultaneously. Referring to the film as a "historical synthesis," Nicole Brenez suggests that the principle of vampirism can be seen to represent "*capitalism as catastrophe*," a collective of different possibilities that may be interpreted uniquely to each viewer (8-9, italics in original). Not only do the images of Vietnam and the Holocaust haunt us into aligning the source of these catastrophes with the horrors of poverty as a result of American imperialism, there is also an overt connection between vampirism and drug addiction, as well as AIDS and other contagious diseases, all of which are absorbed by Kathleen in her attempt to prove that "the only story is the story of evil" (23). In this search to understand the evil inherent in her society, Kathleen kills her victims without sympathy or regret, insisting they have brought this suffering upon themselves by being a member of a corrupt society, unable to mark themselves as individuals by saying no with confidence and walking away. Kathleen's opposition to the sheep-like behaviour of the masses is set up prior to Casanova's attack, during her frustrated discussion with Jean at the beginning of the film, when they debate whether or not it was fair to implicate one man in the raping and murdering of hundreds of Vietnamese women and children, simply because he was the only one in the group whom they could prove guilty. Kathleen is set up as a sympathetic character precisely

for this reason: rather than emphasizing her thirst for blood, *The Addiction* instead focuses on Kathleen's search for knowledge.

In place of the standard initial fright following the vampiric attack, Kathleen is more preoccupied with getting an answer. Denied this privilege by the officer who claims it was a random street attack, Kathleen returns home frustrated and dazed, no longer able to focus on her academic pursuits. A scene shortly after Kathleen's attack shows her absent from class at NYU, appearing only at the end, with sunglasses on, to speak to her professor. Despite his friendly tone and inviting atmosphere, Kathleen responds with one-word answers, suggesting the difficulty she is having with adjusting to her new illness. However, despite the sympathy we feel for Kathleen's struggle, particularly when she is forced into withdrawal, the outcome of the film is to show how the illness ultimately provides her with a new sense of control over her own knowledge, finding the answers she has been searching for in the effects of her addiction. Prior to becoming a vampire, Kathleen is presented as an active PhD student, openly expressing her opinions and questioning what she is taught. However, it is not until she experiences the isolation resulting from her addiction that she finds herself enlightened.

The Addiction's avoidance of the term vampire makes the references to societal concerns (such as drug addiction) more overt because it does not conceal these anxieties under the guise of a mythical figure. Besides Peina's claims of "eternity" and being "nothing," the film's ambiguous title is used more loosely to open up the interpretation of what exactly the protagonist is addicted to. The withdrawal sequence in the final third of the film emphasizes the relationship between isolation and having sympathy for the vampire. This sequence is most obvious in its connection between Kathleen's addiction to blood and the film's reference to drug addiction. Peina, claiming he is 'almost human' because of his

ability to defecate, amongst other 'normal' things that Kathleen is unable to do, such as drinking tea or sleeping at night, forces Kathleen into withdrawal to help alleviate her cravings. Her initial reaction is to try to kill herself, cutting her wrists with a file, but Peina calmly explains that this will not have any effect on her: "You can't kill what's dead. Eternity's a long time. Get used to it." Escaping from Peina's apartment while he is out, Kathleen stumbles along the streets, begging for help, looking for a "fix," as Peina so aptly describes it. The result of Kathleen's isolation is not overcoming her addiction, but obtaining a new understanding of what it means to be addicted. Instead, finding enlightenment in her new control over her addiction, she observes, "existence is the search for relief from our habit, and our habit is the only relief we can find." Rather than focusing on the physical effects of the film's vampiric attacks, the outcome of the protagonist's transformation is to encourage a more qualified understanding of the nature of issues like addiction.[5]

The film's portrayal of addiction also calls attention to the emotion-numbing effects of over-dependency on both legal and illegal substances, which works against the romantic aspect predominant in many of the classical vampire narratives. Although Kathleen's professor appears to be interested in her romantically, Kathleen's preoccupation with dissecting both the words and actions of the people she interacts with leaves her seeming

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[5] When the film was released in 1995, heroin addiction had already been at been a prevalent concern in the United States for several years. For example, in 1971, four years before the end of the Vietnam War, statistics show that 10-15% of American servicemen were addicted to heroin ("History"). When the film was released more than twenty years later, the number of users was still rising: a survey looking at what American drug users were spending on their addictions between 1988 and 2000 showed that somewhere between $10 and $23 billion was spent on heroin during the 90s alone, and in 1995 there were an estimated 428,000 occasional and 923,000 chronic heroine users in the United States ("What"). Likewise, the AIDS crisis, first recognized in the early eighties, continued to be a prominent concern by the mid-nineties when the film was released.

cold-hearted and sexually uninterested. Although her initial reaction to her attack is fear, followed by anger, as she begins to adjust to her new lifestyle, she seems to lose her sense of emotion altogether, speaking in a deep, monotone voice to strangers and friends alike. Even when she tries to use sex appeal to attract victims to prey on, she is not romantic – instead, she bluntly invites them to her house, or even into a nearby alleyway and immediately attacks them without so much as a kiss. The only scene that offers a longer introduction to an attack is when her professor walks her to her flat and she convinces him to come inside. There is a brief glimpse of romantic potential (implied earlier by the special interest the professor has shown in her), but Kathleen quickly exits to the kitchen and returns with materials to prepare some heroin. This emphasizes the film's ultimate metaphor: "Dependency is a marvelous thing. It does more for the soul than any formulation of doctoral material. Indulge me." Here, Kathleen's addiction to blood is blurred with the film's reference to drug addiction in her preparation to inject the heroin into her professor's arm, followed by a cut to him lying lifeless on her bed, two lines on his arm, marked 'IN' and 'OUT.' This shot aligns the two addictions by implying the injection of heroin simultaneously with the extraction of blood. *The Addiction*'s minimal plot and character development is highlighted here with the disappearance of the professor following Kathleen's attack, only to be seen again without explanation at Kathleen's thesis defense, after nearly thirty minutes of the film have passed. Allowing the audience to connect each scene on their own, transitions become less important than the depiction of Kathleen's different stages of addiction.

A similar pace is set in *Let The Right One In*, which also employs long shots and extended takes without filling in all the detail: the camera lingers on depictions of winter in Stockholm and the bonding of young Oskar (Kare Hedebrant) and his vampire neighbour Eli

(Lina Leandersson), often with little or no dialogue. The film begins with an establishing shot of a snowy night, and then introduces Oskar in his room, fighting off imaginary bullies. People are seen moving in next door and, after the introduction of other secondary characters such as Oskar's teacher and classmates, he meets Eli on the climber outside their building. Despite her odd appearance and lack of clothing in the bitter cold, Oskar asks few questions and they become intrigued with each other through a mutual interest in the Rubiks Cube. Oskar is set up as an outcast at school, bullied aggressively by a group of boys, though, the depiction of his growing relationship with Eli throughout the film is aligned with his eventual attempt to defend himself. The support he finds in Eli is depicted as entirely separate from her portrayal as a vampire – he does not recognize her as one until much later in the film. Meanwhile, the town they live in experiences a series of murders, as Hakan (Per Ragnar), Eli's parental figure,[6] hunts down victims to drain their blood for her. As Eli and Oskar grow closer, they begin to bond over their mutual need to attack (Eli for food, Oskar for self-defense). Still, the bullying continues and eventually Eli comes to rescue him.

The final mass killing sequence is set up in direct opposition to the traditional vampire film, which mostly focuses on bloodsucking-induced violence and supernatural powers. Instead, Eli's attack is presented relatively discreetly as a defense killing, rather than a feeding: the camera remains focused on Oskar being held underwater instead of showing the attack directly. This functions as a significant departure from the action sequences of other contemporary vampire films, which highlight the special effects and violence of the vampiric attack. While the sound establishes the perspective of Oskar – the empty hollowness heard underwater – the image depicts only the audience's perspective, watching

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[6] There is also the implication that he was her former lover before he grew old, suggesting that he is what Oskar will eventually become.

the young boy close to drowning, eyes closed and breath held, unaware of anything besides

his impending death. The first sign of something happening above ground comes with a fully

clothed leg swinging through the water in front of Oskar, but still he unknowingly focuses on

holding his breath. The feet appear to be dragging through the pool, suddenly disappear, and

then a decapitated head sinks to the bottom. Suddenly the hand holding Oskar goes limp, and

begins to float downward, only to reveal its bloody stump where it has been severed from the

body. Finally, a much smaller hand grabs hold of Oskar and pulls him out of the water.

Shifting to his perspective, we see an out-of-focus shot of Eli's blood-spattered face, which

clears as Oskar's eyes open further and he realizes she has saved him. A long shot of the

boys lying in pieces on the pool deck confirms both Oskar's and the audience's suspicions

that Eli has finally relieved Oskar of the bullies.

Although this powerful attack (along with a couple other scenes where she moves

through space in a non-human way) suggests that Eli has the capability to move faster and

with more force than most human beings, her powers are "more a matter of stretching the

laws of physics than of breaking them," as Kevin Jackson argues in "The Vampire Next

Door" (42). The film does not dwell on these powers, implying they are a mere side effect of

her illness. In this respect, *Let the Right One In* is less about where Eli comes from or how

she became a vampire than her growing bond with Oskar. When she tells him she is not a

girl, he hardly reacts ("Oh... But do you want to go steady or not?"), and their conversation

about her desire for blood is almost as nonchalant. When he asks Eli if she is a vampire, she

responds: "I live off blood, yes," but never actually gives herself this title. Similarly, when he

asks if she is dead, she replies: "No. Can you tell?" She explains that she is twelve, but has

been twelve for a long time, and then, as if this new information has failed to change

anything, Oskar continues to explore Eli's apartment, observing her treasures. The film demystifies the vampire by refusing to set her up with a mythical background; Eli lacks the traditional goal of converting humans or spreading her disease. Instead, her struggle to survive is just as much a cause for sympathy as the young love that buds between Eli and Oskar, despite their obvious differences. In many ways, this sympathy is provoked by the film's preference for showing reaction over action.

This stylistic inclination is defined by the film's long takes, which are accompanied by little dialogue, separating it from the classical Hollywood style. In the first scene portraying Oskar in the courtyard outside his apartment, nearly two minutes pass – he pulls out his knife, begins attacking a tree, encounters Eli for the first time, and is informed they cannot be friends – before the camera cuts to a reaction shot of Oskar watching Eli walk away, already intrigued by his new neighbour. In many scenes like this, long shots are also external shots, depicting the cold and snowy Swedish winter. When Hakan goes into the forest to find a victim for Eli to feed from, a stationary camera sits at a distance, watching him through the trees, waiting for someone to pass. The take lasts for nearly a minute before cutting to a moving camera, following Hakan and a now limp body through the woods, and then sitting still again, watching him drain the blood.[7] These stylistic differences from the traditional vampire film shift the emphasis on the often-ruthless power of the vampire to feelings of melancholy and isolation associated with vampiric tendencies.

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[7] This next take is more than a minute long, which can be compared to the final attack scene in *Twilight* – heavy on close-up shots, each take lasts no more than ten seconds. While the effect of *Twilight*'s quick reaction shots is to show the viewer exactly how each character is feeling, *Let the Right One In*'s long takes and long shots allow the viewer to be a simple observer, watching the scene unfold without giving away the answers.

Let The Right One In's portrayals of melancholy are connected to the relentless Swedish winters, as depicted in the scene briefly described above. The effect of these harsh conditions ultimately makes the humans' behaviour in the film seem much worse than the vampire's. While Eli's melancholia is related to starvation and her inability to live as a normal child, the citizens of this suburban Stockholm community have a less defined reason for their cruelty. Scenes of Oskar and Eli bonding are contrasted with scenes of Oskar being bullied at school to highlight the more sympathetic nature of the vampire. Similarly, the pompousness of the group of adults meeting at the local bar makes the subsequent death of their friend less grievous to the audience. While her first victim, Jocke, appears naïve, walking home from the bar, when he is attacked, we are urged to feel more sympathy for the vampire, as she begins to sob after feeding on him, than his mourning friends, who seem to portray the same harshness as the wintery setting. Sympathy is also invoked by the use of camera angles in the film, which often reflect the changing relationships between characters.

Oskar and Eli's increasing intimacy is depicted by the camera's gradual movement toward the pair, peaking in a scene comprised almost entirely of close-ups on their faces in Oskar's bed upon agreeing to 'go steady.' Closing with a close up on their hands clasped together, the scene cuts to a medium long exterior shot of the apartment complex covered in snow, then moves back into Oskar's bedroom with a close up on a note Eli has left for him. This shift marks their growing distance from the melancholy of the Swedish winter and the brutality of the bullying that occurs in its midst as they begin to rely solely on each other. The following scene, a school field trip to an outdoor ice rink is dominated by long shots as the children play, and it is only when Oskar begins to defend himself that the shots become closer, marking his new motivation to stand up to the bullies, drawn from his budding

relationship with Eli. The changing camera angles mark the characters' shifts from the isolated melancholia of their lives before meeting, to a new and more inspiring perspective, as the two ultimately board a train, leaving Stockholm's unforgiving weather and residents behind.

A similar use of extended takes in *Trouble Every Day* highlights the film's theme of isolation, particularly because they are accompanied by minimal dialogue. The opening scene of the film introduces Coré (Beatrice Dalle) as she attracts the attention of a passing truck. Although no details are shown or told (instead, a moving handheld camera shows a fifteen second take of the skyline as the sun sets), a cut to a man riding up on a motorcycle and discovering Coré in a field, seemingly unharmed yet covered in blood, hints that she has preyed on the truck driver. Shortly after, Coré and the man (Leo [Alex Descas]) are shown at home together, implying some kind of romantic attachment. Leo is developed as a sympathetic figure, devoted to caring for Coré, though neither their relationship nor the reason for Coré's behaviour is explained in detail. Two other primary characters are introduced soon after: an American couple on a plane to Paris for their honeymoon. Shane (Vincent Gallo) and June (Tricia Vessey) both initially fulfill the typical expectations of newly weds – both excited and nervous – but the former also appears to have some anxiety, defining him as an uneasy character early in the film, though at first there are only vague suggestions that he is suffering from some kind of unknown illness. Upon arrival in Paris, Shane begins searching for someone, though even his new bride seems unaware of his intentions.

The lives of the two couples collide at this point, when it becomes (somewhat) clear that Shane is in fact looking for Leo. A series of brief flashbacks suggest the two men

worked together years before on some kind of medical experiment. It is implied that Coré was also involved – though there are still no details as to what exactly happened, Shane appears anxious to find her after being told she is ill. When he arrives at her flat, their assertive embrace suggests a romantic history (also hinted at earlier by Shane's unconvincing denial of a past affair), but, soon after, Coré sets fire to her flat and Shane strangles her, leaving her to be consumed by the flames. Following this inexplicable encounter, Shane returns to the hotel and feeds on their housekeeper. The film ends back in the hotel room, where June returns to find Shane in the shower and waits hesitantly for him to come out. When Shane retreats, he tells his wife he is feeling good, but wants to go home, and their subsequent embrace suggests the potential for a happy ending. However, in the final moments, the camera switches to the perspective of June as we see a drop of blood roll down the shower door and her reaction shot, wide-eyed, still embracing her husband, leaves much uncertainty at the film's close.

This vagueness is heightened by the number of questions left unanswered at the end of the film (I am hesitant to call it a 'conclusion,' as very little actually concludes here). In the end, the characters in the film end up being more of a mystery than the illness itself. Once it is implied that the disease is the result of a medical experiment, the audience is still left wondering about the goals of both the individual characters and the initial experiment. Shane's behaviour, perhaps the strangest of all of them, is unexplained for the majority of the film and the end continues in its elusiveness as he never actually finds Leo – only the implication that there is no cure for his illness. It is equally unclear why Coré was involved in the experiment and whether she has any goals beyond killing and consuming as a result – her single line in the film reveals that she simply wants to die. Leo seems to want to protect Coré,

but at the same time appears disgusted by her, and June appears to be simultaneously in love with Shane and ready to give up on him. Perhaps the most ambiguous character is the housekeeper who is mostly portrayed as separate from the other characters, yet, in many scenes, is given her own perspective. In the end, her only defined purpose is as a victim for Shane. The lack of clarity regarding these characters' goals ultimately prevents the viewer from relating to any of them as the protagonist, a direct opposition to the traditional vampire narrative, which focuses closely on goal driven characters, typically including the vampire figure. Yet, even though these characters are emotionally detached from our perspective, sympathy is still invoked through the vague implications that they are humans, rather than the supernatural creatures that typically exhibit the same aggressive tendencies.

Ambiguity separates *Trouble Every Day* from the traditional vampire film because it never actually establishes itself as one. In his article "Textures of Terror: Claire Denis' *Trouble Every Day*," Douglas Morrey points out that even though the term vampire is never used in the film, there are still plenty of discreet references to the conventions of the vampire film: the ring of blood around Coré's mouth; the camera lingering around the chambermaid's neck from Shane's point of view; what looks like the mark of a bite on June's upper arm; Shane's sensitivity to the bright light in the lab; Coré opening her coat like bat wings as she absorbs the night air; and, finally, Coré being consumed by flames near the end of the film. These reflections of conventional notions of vampirism are presented as the side effects of an illness and focus more on the medical aspect than trying to set up the predetermined conventions that traditional vampire films tend to follow. Furthermore, Morrey suggests that *Trouble* is able to resist the all-consuming theoretical discourse of the horror/vampire film by not "allowing itself to be claimed by the genre with its full iconographic and ideological

implications. The film, as it were, references a tradition of vampire cinema, but without ever quite 'coming out' as a vampire movie."

The characters in *Trouble Every Day* are also removed from the traditional characters of the vampire narrative because of their lack of romantic qualities. Any scenes of what might be considered romance are highly contradictory: passionate sex scenes that are far more frightening than erotic are contrasted with couples who appear to be in love, yet physically lack the passion they attempt to express. Neither of these two cases is typical of the romanticized vampire film, which portrays love stemming from the exoticness of the vampire. Instead, these couples exhibit the surface qualities of people in love – kissing and sweet talk between newlyweds Shane and June on the plane, and Leo's protection of Coré despite her aggressive behaviour – yet seem ultimately unable to follow through with the expectations of 'real' romance – honesty, passion, trust. The film's two most gruesome scenes, however, are also important indicators of the theme of isolation running throughout *Trouble Every Day*. Both Coré and Shane's extra-marital sexual encounters and subsequent killings highlight the reasons for their inability to experience romance in their relationships. Both Coré's encounter with the neighbourhood boy and Shane's with the hotel housekeeper mark the film's notably few gory scenes considering its resemblance to the horror genre in many other ways.[8]

Coré's encounter with the neighborhood boy starts out erotic as they begin to kiss through the wooden barrier that keeps her inside, and the boy struggles to break through into her room. Once he succeeds, the camera cuts to a close up on a bare stomach, not

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[8] Philippe Met's article "Looking for Trouble: The dialectics of lack and excess" notes some of the film's "obligatory horror genre motifs—an unexplained curse, bestial or monstrous behaviour, scientific hubris, brain dissection, a chainsaw…"

immediately distinguishable because it is so close up and detached from the rest of the body. As Lisa Downing notes in her article "Re-Viewing the Sexual Relation: Levinas and Film:" "in the controversial erotic-horror pastiche *Trouble Every Day* (2001), the human body is subjected to a radical making-unfamiliar" (56). The camera slowly moves along the naked body until male chest hair and nipples become recognizable, and then cuts to the boy's face, revealing a relaxed pleasure as he lies in Coré's bed. Remaining close, the camera follows her hands slowly moving along his body and then pulls back to reveal their lower halves connecting, before briefly cutting to the boy's friend waiting downstairs for him. Coré's touch becomes more aggressive as she moves up to kiss him and the camera seems to focus more specifically on his extended neck, which she begins to nip at. While this appears playful at first, the scene quickly shifts from erotic to gruesome as non-diegetic music cues to speed up the pace, and she pins down his arms, preparing to attack. The first sign of his displeasure comes in his moans, which have turned from those of pleasure to pain, followed by his cringing face as Coré grabs his head and takes complete control. Finally, his soft moans become intense screams of terror and agony, begging her to stop, as blood begins to run down his face. After cutting back, a final time, to his friend downstairs, ultimately deciding not to investigate the cries, the camera returns to Coré, continuing to devour the boy's face and, later, poking at the holes she has created in his body. Morrey reads this as a rare depiction of "a male body, reconfigured as open and accessible." This scene is paralleled soon after by a similar attack made by Shane back at his hotel, though Coré's encounter, and subsequent bloody artwork on the canvas of their white wall, is much more extensive.

After he has found Coré and discovers he is not alone in his intense craving for blood, Shane appears to be inspired to satisfy his own thirst and follows the housekeeper down to

the basement of the hotel, where she is changing, to seduce her. Like the earlier scene with Coré and the neighbour, the encounter begins consensual, with the victim appearing to expect little more than a random sexual rendezvous. This time, however, the scene is filmed further back, revealing the couple groping each other from a medium shot and following them down to the floor at the same distance. The switch from erotic to terrifying happens much more quickly here, with Coré's gentle touching being replaced by Shane's frantic removal of the girl's underwear and aggressive movements on top of her, pinning her down. It is obvious much sooner that the victim is uncomfortable as she struggles and shouts, trying to free herself from his attack. The differences between these two scenes suggest that Coré's much earlier awareness of her illness makes her a more sympathetic vampire, while Shane, just coming to terms with his urges, comes across as more of a culprit. Whereas Coré preys on the boy's face and chest, Shane indulges immediately in the housekeeper's female parts, emphasizing much more sexual implications to his perversion.

While sexuality remains fairly explicit throughout *Trouble Every Day*, the lack of romance in the scenes I have analyzed emphasizes the dominating sense of isolation and melancholy resulting from the vampire-like illness the characters suffer from. Despite the challenge to relate to their hidden or non-existent goals, Denis presents Shane and, even more so, Coré, because of her progressed state, as sympathetic vampires by focusing on their struggles to comprehend and deal with their diseases. By reading their bloodsucking tendencies as the result of a medical experiment, rather than of mythical origin, viewers are more inclined to attempt to understand the nature of the symptoms being presented.

Moving away from the romantic aspect of the vampire as a supernatural being, each of these three films – *The Addiction*, *Let The Right One In*, and *Trouble Every Day* – de-

mystify those who crave human blood so their actions are seen more as the side effects of their illness. As a result, these characters draw our attention not because of their special powers, but because of their struggle to understand the nature of their disease. Sympathy is thus invoked by suggestions of melancholy and isolation through both narrative and stylistic techniques. In *The Addiction*, Kathleen's melancholy is caused by her frustration at being unable to understand the nature of her addiction. Feelings of isolation in particular are highlighted by the film's black and white appearance, emphasizing the shadows created around Kathleen's situation. Similarly, *Let The Right One In*'s style, depicting the Stockholm winter's short hours of sunlight, underscores the film's melancholic attitude toward the cruelty of humans, both adults and children, making the designated monster of the film seem significantly less monstrous than its secondary characters. Finally, *Trouble Every Day* offers extended, virtually silent, shots of its characters in the film's Parisian setting, all of them appearing lost amongst its disconnected images of isolation due to the lethal illness of two primary characters. In each of these situations, sympathy is called for by the vampires' roles as protagonists, allowing viewers to witness their respective struggles to come to terms with the nature of the illnesses being portrayed.

CHAPTER 3:

VENGEANCE, VIOLENCE, VAMPIRES

Dark Humour in the Films of Park Chan-wook

"Revenge is good for your health,

but pain will find you again."

- Oh Dae-su, *Oldboy*

      This line from South Korean filmmaker Park Chan-wook's third feature film, *Oldboy* (2003) comes at one of the rare times when dialogue directly conveys the moral of his film, rather than his tendency to rely on the visuals. Best known for his onscreen displays of graphic violence, especially in his Vengeance Trilogy, Park is recognized as an auteur for his blending of horror and action with more than a hint of dark humour. Irony is especially important in his use of violence because it highlights the fact that his films are ultimately about the failure of revenge; rather than depicting the satisfaction resulting from seeking vengeance, Park's protagonists tend to end up suffering just as much as their victims. While the use of dark humour in all of Park's films draws attention to the futility of the revenge and graphic violence being portrayed, he has, more recently, begun to move away from pure visual excess to more closely considering the psychological effects of violence and revenge. In his most recent film, *Thirst* (2009), Park adapts the Western vampire narrative to portray a more globalized take on violence and a more concentrated form of revenge: his protagonist, Sang-hyun (Song Kang-ho) is up against himself in this battle, after travelling to Africa and subjecting himself to vampire cells that lead him to question his morals as a Catholic priest. While the use of graphic violence in all of Park's films can be read as a response to the

nation's tumultuous past, the barbaric vengeance of his earlier films is distinctly different from the primarily internal dilemma of *Thirst*, which deals with conflicts of man versus himself and man versus nature in place of the man versus man battles of the Vengeance Trilogy. Before delving deeper into the context of Park Chan-wook's use of dark humour and onscreen violence, however, a brief situating of the relationship between South Korea's political state and film industry is warranted.

In "Globalisation and New Korean Cinema," Jeeyoung Shin notes that it was in 1994 when the Korean government began to take a special interest in globalization, introducing the concept of *segyehwa* ("*segye* meaning 'world' and *hwa* meaning 'becoming/turning into'") as part of a renewed political campaign (53). Part of this policy drew attention to a statistic showing that profits from *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993) equaled the export revenue of 1.5 million Hyundai cars, urging President Kim Young-sam "to promote the high technology media industry as a strategic national industry" (ibid). This led to the development of the Film Promotion Law in 1995 and the Busan International Film Festival in 1996, both of which continue to promote the making and distribution of Korean films. Shin points out that the introduction of the festival not only opened up an occasion for showcasing Korean cinema, it also led to more Korean films being invited to festivals in other countries, which created more opportunities for foreign co-productions (55). Darcy Paquet, in *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Waves*, also acknowledges the increasing number of film production programs at Korean universities around this time,[9] another factor responsible for the growth of Korean cinema during this period. This increase was matched by the number of young

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[9] "The number of film production departments at Korean universities stood at nine in 1989, 17 in 1996, 29 in 1999 and 52 in 2007" (Paquet 67).

aspiring directors who also chose to go abroad for a more international filmmaking

perspective (Paquet 67-8).

Yet, Michael Robinson's consideration of global awareness in Korean cinema in his

article "Contemporary Cultural Production in South Korea," suggests that Korea's concern

for globalization actually came prior to Kim Young-sam's 1994 *segyehwa* campaign, with

the 1993 film *Sopyonje* (Im Kwon-taek). This film marked a distinct change in local

reception, which was a precursor to the increased international perspective within Korean

cinema. While the government had put a lot of money into restoring Korean traditions after

being occupied by Japan, there was little room for creativity amongst filmmakers, as they

were expected to incorporate as much traditional content as possible. South Korean cinema

began to gain international recognition into the 80s, perhaps because of the exoticness of the

customs being portrayed for non-Korean audiences, but domestically, interest was fading.

Robinson suggests that *Sopyonje*, however, turned out to be the perfect balance of tradition

and creativity. Recognizing a dying practice for what it was, Koreans were attracted to both

the film's realism and its cultural roots, placing tradition in the contemporary context of the

1990s. It seems the greatest factor for the success of this film was its timing: it came at a

point when Koreans were simply looking for some kind of acknowledgment of their former

oppression, tired of pretending it had not happened. *Sopyonje* also hit home with its portrayal

of traditional concepts such as *han*, the Korean cultural concept of lament. As Robinson's

description notes, "one of the film's main plot lines in which the student-daughter in the

fictive family of singers is blinded by the father so that she might gain the *han* necessary for

her singing to reach its ultimate power in some way seemed to sublimate the collective *han* in

1990s Korea itself" (27). *Han*, Robinson writes, is "deeply seeded [in the] Korean experience

of oppression and unrequited resentment borne of generations of struggle" (ibid). Connecting

this fading Korean tradition to a contemporary situation allowed both domestic and

international audiences a renewed faith in Korean cinema, finally able to embrace their own

culture as part of a global collective. Robinson concludes:

> Koreans, now reveling in the lightness of liberation from the master narratives of
>
> their past, are now willing to laugh both with and at themselves. Perhaps this joy is
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> taken for granted by Koreans under the age of forty but, for elders, this must feel
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> strange – a strangeness borne of finally receiving permission to view the past
>
> without regret and banish its pain from the present. (28-29)

Following the success of *Sopyonje*, Koreans began to watch more of their own films, with

Shiri (Kang, 1999) out grossing *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997) at the Korean box-office. The

following year, *Shiri*'s domestic success was topped by Park Chan-wook's *Joint Security*

Area (2000), a military drama depicting tensions surrounding the North-South border of the

two Koreas.

As suggested by its title, *JSA* takes place within the Korean Demilitarized Zone

(DMZ), in a village designated as a neutral meeting place for both sides of the border. The

film follows the investigation of a Swiss military officer (born to a Swiss mother and a

Korean father), who has been brought into Korea to resolve the mystery of the death of two

men, one from each side of the border. Using a *Rashomon*-like narrative to depict both sides

of the story, the shift between past and present is not always clear, but comes together in the

end with the discovery that neither account is reliable. Much like its predecessors, *Sopyonje*

and *Shiri*, *Joint Security Area* was partly successful due to its combination of contemporary

Korean culture and global representation through the Swiss officer, Sophie (Lee Young-ae).[10]

Although Park had already directed a few (less popular) films prior to the release of *JSA*, this was the film that launched his career. As noted on Koreanfilm.org, the film broke various records, including the one set by *Shiri* the year before – a million viewers in 21 days – managing, instead, to break a million admissions in only 15 days ("Korean…2000"). But this was only the start of a bright new future for Park Chan-wook.

Two years later, the much-anticipated *Sympathy For Mr. Vengeance* (Park, 2002) was released, marking the first of three films in Park's Vengeance Trilogy, to be followed by *Oldboy* (2003), and *Lady Vengeance* (2005). It was with this series that Park began to craft his signature focus on revenge and violence. In an article entitled "Love Your Enemies," Steve Choe points out that it is in this trilogy that Park begins to push "the logic of revenge to its breaking point, radically problematizing its vulgar ethics of retribution as an impossible aporia" (31). Although *JSA* touches on themes of revenge with the unreliable accounts given by soldiers from each side of the border, it is the Vengeance Trilogy that really brings light to the issue as a mystifying human instinct. While Choe cites various critics who find Park's extreme take on both violence and revenge over the top and unjustifiable, he also refers to an interview with Park that suggests his vengeance films distinctively highlight the fact that revenge is often the most foolish choice, while, on the contrary, most revenge films tend to avoid admitting this altogether (34). Park's use of dark humour allows his protagonists to come across as fascinatingly crazy – simultaneously heroes, villains, and victims. This approach allows the films to critique rather than support "everyday depictions of revenge in

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[10] Not long after the release of JSA, Michael Atkinson, in an August 2001 issue of *The Village Voice*, observed of Korean cinema: "The movies–from South Korea (the North's still lost in the fairy-tale forest of socialist propaganda)–naturally demonstrate both an eager-to-please Americanism and a distinctly Korean taste for jugular wine" ("Blood Feuds").

the cinema, where revenge is all too easily justified and even celebrated as such" (35). Instead, the Vengeance Trilogy presents the worst-case scenarios – revenge gone terribly wrong – which leave few, if any, admirable characters. In *Mr. Vengeance*, we end up pitying rather than sympathizing with either avenger after the maddening effects of their spite have overcome them both, and the same is true for the protagonist throughout *Oldboy*. *Lady Vengeance*, slightly more emotional in its depiction of a mother-daughter relationship, also portrays the gruesomeness of its protagonist's intentions, even if forgiveness for the vengeful act is closer to the forefront of this film than the others.

The concept of forgiveness in *Mr. Vengeance*, on the other hand, is inconceivable. The film tells the story of a deaf factory worker in search of a kidney to save his dying sister. When the hospital is unable to find a suitable one, Ryu (Shin Ha-kyun) resolves to trade all of his savings, as well as one of his own kidneys, to black market workers who have promised a match for his sister in return. Following the surgery, however, Ryu wakes to find both his money and his kidney missing, only then receiving notice that the hospital has found one, but requires the same amount of money he has just lost. In response, his anarchist girlfriend, Yeong-mi (Bae Doona) schemes up a plan to kidnap the daughter of Ryu's boss's friend, Dong-jin (Song Kang-ho) and hold her for ransom, but when the girl accidently drowns just before being returned to her father, the revenge plot suddenly thickens. The father vows to kill Ryu and his girlfriend, and they are equally adamant about getting revenge on the black market gang who ripped Ryu off. In the end, everyone winds up dead and the extremities of revenge draw attention to its futility. This "uncompromising violence, black humour, and degradation" portrayed in *Mr. Vengeance* leads Anthony Leong to suggest that Park's style was influenced by Japanese filmmakers Takeshi Kitano and Takashi Miike, both

of whom have gained auteur status for their recurring exploitation of nihilism, violence, and

sexual perversity (159). Likewise, Park's style has been recognized internationally,

particularly through the success of *Mr. Vengeance,* which initiated his signature vengeance

theme. This created much anticipation for the release of his following film three years later.

Upon release, *Oldboy* grossed over $3 million in Korea alone, with a nine-week run

and a fifth-place ranking for highest grossing films of 2003 ("Korean…2003"). *Oldboy* is set

up as a revenge film much faster than its precursor, spending twenty minutes situating

protagonist Oh Dae-su's (Choi Min-sik) purpose for revenge.[11] A mere five minutes into the

film (immediately following the opening credits), it becomes clear that Oh Dae-su has been

kidnapped and the following fifteen minutes are spent summarizing his fifteen years held in

an isolated room, unsure of who his captor may be or what his motivation is. Then, just as

suddenly as he was taken, Oh Dae-su is released, but continues to be taunted by the captor,

who urges him to work out his identity and purpose. Having spent the past fifteen years

preparing to take revenge on whomever imprisoned him, Oh Dae-su readily takes on the

challenge, adopting a young sushi chef, Mi-do (Kang Hye-jeong) as his sidekick and

girlfriend. The film's over the top fight scenes, where Oh Dae-su manages to take on dozens

of men at once and still come out on top, highlights Park's deliberate emphasis on the

foolishness of violence and revenge, contrasting such unlikely scenes of escape with pathetic

ones in which the senselessness of his search is focused upon.[12] Although both manage to

survive in the end, it is not framed in such a way that any character comes out on top.

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[11] This can be compared to the hour – half the film – that passes before the various plotlines
of *Mr. Vengeance* come together to justify its title.
[12] Such as halfway through the film when he and Mi-do are ambushed in their hotel room
and handcuffed to the furniture.

Instead, Oh Dae-su and his captor, Woo-jin (Yu Ji-tae), are both made to look pathetic in their respective endeavors to seek revenge.

This notion of the futility of revenge is carried over into the final film of the trilogy, in which a mother tries to simultaneously gain her daughter's approval and payback the man who forced her to spend several years in prison for a crime she did not commit. *Lady Vengeance*, as the title suggests, switches to a female protagonist who has falsely admitted to murdering a young boy in order to protect her newborn daughter whose life has been threatened by the real murderer, Mr. Baek (Choi Min-sik). After obtaining a reduced sentence due to years of good behaviour in prison, Lee Geum-ja (Lee Young-ae) seeks out her now teenaged daughter, Jenny (Kwan Yae-young), who has been adopted by an Australian family and only speaks English. In addition to her struggle to bond with Jenny, Geum-ja actively seeks out Mr. Baek to avenge his crimes. Yet, as Steve Choe argues, *Lady Vengeance* takes the revenge theme in a new direction by offering "an interpretation of revenge that opens up a different logic altogether, one dictated less by punishment and payback and more by the possibility of forgiveness" (31). While Geum-ja has the opportunity to kill her victim early in the film, she chooses to wait, and, even when he is finally killed near the end, the focus is on whether or not Geum-ja can be forgiven by her daughter for her own act of violence. In a *Cineaste* review of the film in 2006, Robert Cashill suggests

> what lifts *Lady Vengeance* over standard avenger movies is Geum-ja's agonizing need for atonement. The Bride, in Tarantino's *Kill Bill* saga, doesn't waste time fretting about past crimes as she goes on a rampage that references little besides her creator's storehouse of movie clichés. (58)

Instead, Park's film is more about repentance than sheer violence.

The theme of atonement ultimately dominates over violence in Park's most recent film, *Thirst*, as well. Despite the continued presence of the director's trademark gore, *Thirst* also focuses more on forgiveness than revenge. Invoking the religious concept of absolution, Park reinterprets the traditional Western vampire narrative as the basis of his story, portraying a Catholic priest who is infected by vampire blood cells at the beginning of the film. After volunteering to participate in a medical experiment in Africa, Sang-hyun (Song Kang-ho) is given a blood transfusion that leaves him craving human blood. But, because he is the only person to survive this experiment, his faithful parishioners regard Sang-hyun as a miracle worker and his vampiric symptoms seem to go unnoticed. When he encounters an old childhood friend, Kang-woo (Shin Ha-kyun), and his mother, Lady Ra (Kim Hae-sook), he begins to make weekly trips to their home to play Mahjong. It is not long, however, before he is unable to control his desires and begins an illicit relationship with Kang-woo's wife Tae-ju (Kim Ok-bin), leaving him incapable of maintaining the values he was raised on by the church. Tae-ju, innocent though she looks, manages to fool the sympathetic Sang-hyun into believing her husband abuses her, and the two plot Kang-woo's demise, death by drowning, to be executed on a late night fishing trip. The remainder of the film depicts the psychological effects this murder has on both Sang-hyun and Tae-ju, and as the latter becomes increasingly devious in her attempt to justify her participation in the crime, Sang-hyun resolves to kill her, but at the last minute turns her into a vampire instead. In the end, finally coming to terms with the fact that he cannot conquer his conflict with himself or Tae-ju, Sang-hyun surrenders both of their bodies to the sunlight.

Despite this shift from focusing on the sheer brutality of violence in *Mr. Vengeance* and *Oldboy* to the justified terms of vengeance in *Lady Vengeance* and *Thirst*, all of Park's films contain an undertone of dark humour. This encourages the viewer to question what they are being shown rather than accept it at face value. Furthermore, these films get increasingly dark as they move into psychological exploration. Although the use of dark humour is often less obvious than other forms of comedy, Wes D. Gehring notes three key themes of dark humour narratives in his book *American Dark Comedy*: "man as beast," "the absurdity of the world," and "the omnipresence of death" (166). These themes can be found in all of Park's films, especially in the later ones, which pay more attention to narrative detail. The use of the "man as beast" characters (in most of Park's films there are more than one) emphasizes the non-heroic aspect of vengeance. Dong-jin, Oh Dae-su, and Geum-ja all come out looking desperately pathetic as they sink deeper into their vengeance missions, while Sang-hyun, the more obvious beast, becomes increasingly troubled by the conflict of his Catholic morals and his vampiric desires. "The absurdity of the world" is played out through characters who provoke these revenge plots (in *Mr. Vengeance* it is both Ryu and his girlfriend's anarchist scheme and the black market gang; in *Oldboy*, Woo-jin; in *Lady Vengeance,* Mr. Baek), as well as the absurd circumstance of Sang-hyun's blood transfusion in *Thirst* that leaves him with such strange desires. Finally, "the omnipresence of death," or perhaps in Park's case, the *obsession* with death, is at the forefront of these films, especially in the first contribution to the trilogy, where all the main characters wind up dead, as well as in the most recent film where Sang-hyun exposes himself and Tae-ju to the sun at the end to obtain absolution for the other deaths they have caused in order to satisfy their thirst (for both sex and blood).

It is really only in this last example, however, that a coherent resolution to the outcomes of violence and revenge is presented. The ambiguous endings of the Vengeance Trilogy films may suggest the futility of revenge, but the end redemption in *Thirst* is arrived at through a relatively coherent path of cause and effect. Although widely praised for marking Park's signature style, the Vengeance Trilogy has often been criticized for having one particular flaw: critics argue that, while the films are striking (in the most perverse way possible) to watch, the narratives are less than engaging due to their overly ambiguous and often redundant nature. *Thirst* is still in some ways tedious in its tendency to show a series of individually impressive scenes that do not always fit smoothly together, but the film still manages a balance between image and narrative.[13] Whether or not this comes in response to prior criticism, *Thirst* remains unquestionably easier to follow than Park's earlier work.

This sense of balance is also pertinent to Michael Robinson's analysis mentioned above, as well as the "hybrid cultural forms" noted by Jeeyoung Shin, which "provide an important means for their [Koreans'] self-definition, a self-definition that not only distances itself from a xenophobic and moralizing adherence to local cultural 'tradition' but also challenges Western cultural hegemony" (57). Likewise, Park's films seem increasingly aware of this hybrid form, an awareness that peaks in *Thirst*, his most recent film. Bringing the Western vampire tradition to Eastern screens via Africa, where Sang-hyun has acquired the diseased blood cells, the film takes on more of a cross-cultural perspective to draw domestic and international audiences alike. Although Sang-hyun was not infected in the traditional Western sense, the film does acknowledge his symptoms as a result of being given a blood transfusion containing vampire cells (though, this word is used sparingly – and in English –

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[13] Not to mention its captivating use of sound to highlight the slurping and sucking of both the feeding and sex scenes.

throughout the film). As Hyangjin Lee points out in "South Korea: Film on the Global

Stage": "imitation of Hollywood tends to be suggested as the most effective way to challenge

Hollywood's dominance in Asia and lead the successful 'internationalization' of Korean

national cinema" (185). This can be seen in the readiness of many Korean filmmakers to sell

the rights for Hollywood re-makes, as well as the success of many Korean films within other

Asian countries, such as Hong Kong and Japan. Lee also recognizes the blending of art-house

and commercial styles of filmmaking as another source of South Korean cinema's success

overseas, particularly in Europe and America (185). While these influences are reflected in

Park's earlier films, which typically combine conventional aspects of the horror/thriller genre

with his own artistic mix of non-linear narrative and dark humour, *Thirst* epitomizes South

Korea's growing global interest with its overt international framework.

The portrayal of the protagonist as a Catholic priest allows for immediate recognition

of the film's connection between Korean characters and a traditionally Western religion.

Despite the fact that many of the characters appear to be over-the-top followers, Tae-ju

makes it clear that she is not a believer, thus explaining her lack of concern for the outcomes

of their adulterous relationship: "I don't have faith. I'm not going to hell." However, because

their opposing beliefs are not debated to any extent, it is ultimately unclear throughout the

film whether it intends to support or deny the Catholic faith. This allows Park to portray both

sides of this situation, which goes much further than the context of the film,[14] by presenting a

more ambiguous portrayal of the Catholicism at the center of it.

Other references in the film also draw attention to the blending of local and global

practices without preoccupying itself with religion. The use of traditional Korean pop music

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[14] Though most religious Koreans have converted to Christianity, some still remain Buddhist and many do not claim any religious affiliation.

('trot') is predominant throughout the film, as is the playing of a classic Chinese game, Mahjong, above a traditional Korean dress shop. Furthermore, when Tae-ju takes over the house, she tells the comatose Mrs. Ra that they will wear shoes in the house now, "like in the States." These aspects of the film, amongst others,[15] represent *Thirst*'s contribution to the New Korean Cinema, which aims to find a balance between the portrayal of global values to appeal to both domestic and international audiences.

Joseph Tomkins and Julie A. Wilson argue that South Korea's response to globalization "provid[es] a representational site that intimates the very essence of historical struggle in the face of global capitalism" through his recurring portrayals of violence and revenge (69). In their article "The Political Unconscious of Park Chan-wook," Tomkins and Wilson examine how several of Park's films (pre-*Thirst*) "sadistically drag[…] his spectators into a blood-thirsty world where unspeakable acts and invisible assailants announce a near total experience of existential and environmental alienation" (ibid). While *Thirst* is less about revenge than the films in the Vengeance Trilogy, the violence that is portrayed is no less explicit. Furthermore, the alienation Tomkins and Wilson refer to is, perhaps, even more prominent in this most recent film, which portrays Tae-ju as an orphan, forced into marriage with her adopted brother; Sang-hyun as a priest, forced to go against what he preaches because of his vampiric ways; and other, secondary, characters, such as the blind priest, alienated by his own disability and Sang-hyun's inability to continue helping him. Yet, rather than portraying these characters as sentimental, the film's use of dark humour helps to emphasize their misfortunes in a more realistic way, by de-romanticizing and de-mystifying

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[15] Is it, perhaps, no coincidence that the vampire's name is "Sang" – French for blood? The film is, after all, meant to be an adaptation of French novel *Therese Raquin* (Emile Zola, 1867).

the vampire, as well as allowing for the consideration of taboo subjects such as the questioning of religion, the act of adultery, and the contemplation of both suicide and death in general.

In *Thirst,* Park Chan-wook's signature style meets the traditional Western vampire film, by presenting a narrative full of sex scenes without portraying the vampire as a romantic character. Instead, Sang-hyun becomes increasingly passionate as his vampiric qualities set in, yet his sexual encounters with Tae-ju are, at best, awkward and even at times vulgar. As a priest, Sang-hyun lacks any sexual experience, so the first time he is with Tae-ju, she takes control. This scene depicts Tae-ju explaining herself as she climbs on top of an unsure, but clearly aroused, Sang-hyun. Neither of their facial expressions match their moans of pleasure – they both look incredibly uncomfortable. Their second encounter is no less awkward, though significantly more intense: Sang-hyun begins by admiring Tae-ju's blistered feet and proceeds to suck her toes passionately for no less than a minute of the film, before moving up to bite her neck. Tae-ju appears to be aroused by both of these actions, but, again, their facial expressions suggest confusion rather than comfort. In their final sex scene, Sang-hyun moves from caressing Tae-ju to licking her face like an animal and then leaning in to sniff and lick her armpit, as they both continue moaning. Their repeated sounds of sex, mismatched with their uncomfortable, even bored, facial expressions, are complimented by an undertone of dark humour to highlight the "absurdities of the world," (as Gehring would phrase it) in the form of priest-turned-vampire desires.

Thirst also uses dark humour to de-mystify the vampire by presenting Sang-hyun's methods of obtaining blood as a more realistic feat than the simple routine of the traditional vampire that preys on innocent victims by night, specifically by using his comatose friend,

Hyo-sung, who "loved helping the hungry." One scene, particularly effective in its use of

dark humour, focuses in on Hyo-sung looking peaceful in his coma, in a dark hospital room.

As a faint slurping sound begins to grow louder, however, the camera slowly lowers, first

revealing blood moving through an IV tube attached to Hyo-sung's arm, and then continuing

to move downward. When the blood temporarily stops flowing, it becomes obvious that it

has been travelling out of his arm rather than in, and the moving camera reveals Sang-hyun's

hand holding onto the tube, which leads to his mouth. A medium close-up of Sang-hyun

shows his bandaged face sucking ferociously at the tube of blood, and then the camera moves

overhead to piece the picture together: Hyo-sung lies quietly breathing on the bed, while

Sang-hyun lies on the floor beside him, consuming his blood. This scene does not offer an

obvious cue for laughter, but it is difficult to refrain from smirking at the sight of this priest,

perplexed in his mission to find a balance between his Catholic faith and his intense desires

as a vampire. The darkness of the scene is in keeping with the traditional vampire style, while

the ironic humour allows for a de-mystified version, depicting more realistic means of

obtaining blood, in an exceptional example of "man as beast." This combination of darkness

and humour to portray the repulsiveness of man is similarly used to address the subject of

adultery.

While Sang-hyun's concern for the outcome of their relationship is fairly obvious

("We can both go to hell for this"), Tae-ju's guilt is only apparent when they are both

haunted by the dead Kang-woo, after his death. What has the potential to be a passionate

lovemaking scene between Sang-hyun and Tae-ju is interrupted by an apparition of Kang-

woo watching and laughing hysterically at them. This extended scene begins by introducing

their new fear of water – after touching Tae-ju, Sang-hyun asks why she is so wet and then

looks around for a leak in the waterbed. After Tae-ju tries to convince him it is psychological, they continue to embrace but she seems to be hiding her own hesitation. Following a shot of Sang-hyun trapped in his coffin, Tae-ju is shown in her room, turning the lights on, frightened. Suddenly she is splashed by water and the camera moves up to reveal Kang-woo, drenched, sitting over her with a pair of scissors. The camera cuts to Sang-hyun's coffin, where water is gushing out as if he is drowning inside, and then cuts back to Tae-ju's room where Sang-hyun comes to see her. They begin to have sex, but suddenly Kang-woo is lying in between them. Finally, it cuts to the two of them on the bed, awake but facing opposite directions, with Kang-woo in between, holding the rock that drowned him, appearing to be at peace. This marks the last depiction of intercourse between Sang-hyun and Tae-ju, implying they are too affected by their guilt to continue sleeping together.

In the end, *Thirst* offers little hope – even when Sang-hyun tells Tae-ju they will be together in hell, her response is: "When you're dead, you're dead. It's been fun, Father," highlighting the dark humour of the film until its final moments. Tae-ju's last words are followed by silent anticipation (for both the characters and the audience), as Sang-hyun and Tae-ju sit in the middle of nowhere and wait for the sun to come up (three continuous minutes of roasting) before the suffering finally ends and we see the ashes of what were once their feet fall to the ground with their shoes. This is, no doubt, how Gehring would define death as the heart of the dark comedy.

The success of *Thirst* both domestically and internationally speaks simultaneously to the significance of the contemporary vampire film, Park Chan-wook as a filmmaker, and South Korean cinema in general. As an addition to the vampire film canon, *Thirst* offers a renewed interpretation of familiar conventions by emphasizing the conflict of religion

inherent in vampire symbolism. While earlier vampire narratives have focused on religion as the source of opposing forces of good and evil, *Thirst*'s unique portrayal of a Catholic vampire presents contradictions that encourage audiences to reconsider the implications of this disease. The film is also stylistically distinct in its use of dark humour to compliment grotesque images of blood and violence. Furthermore, Park's addition of a vampire narrative to his oeuvre shows audiences that he has not limited his filmmaking style to scenes that merely look 'cool,' instead unifying image, sound, and story in his unique interpretation of a traditionally Western narrative, connecting South Korean cinema to a global perspective. This has allowed for international recognition of his films, targeting them as important sources for Hollywood re-makes[16]. With this in mind, Julian Stringer, in "Putting Korean Cinema in its Place," points out: "Hollywood, as the global capitalist film industry *par excellence* […] represents everything that the new commercial Korean cinema either promises or threatens to become" (97). Park has long-since attracted the attention of Hollywood audiences through director and avid fan Quentin Tarantino,[17] and his upcoming film, *Stoker*, slated for release next year, is currently being made in the United States, starring Australian and British actors Mia Wasikowska, Colin Firth, and Nicole Kidman. Being amongst the first Korean films to feature the Western vampire tradition, *Thirst*, if

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[16] There were rumours back in 2009 (NowPublic.com, AintItCool.com, DramaBeans.com, Mubi.com) that Steven Spielberg was planning to direct an adaptation of the same manga Park's *Oldboy* was based on, starring Will Smith. It appears, however, that this plan has been cancelled due to some kind of legal issues (blog.ningin.com). In January 2010, several sources (TheFilmStage.com, ScreenRant.com, ScreeningLog.com) also announced that Warned Bros. had acquired the rights to *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, but no further information has been posted.

[17] Tarantino also happened to be the jury head for the Cannes Film Festival when *Oldboy* received the Grand Prix in 2004.

nothing else, will likely be regarded in years to come as the stepping-stone for Park Chan-

wook's rise (or fall) to the fame and glory of Hollywood filmmaking.

CHAPTER 4:

CHINESE HOPPING VAMPIRES

Reconstructing a Western Tradition

The story of a spirit with unfinished business, restlessly roaming the villages of its past, haunting those that stand in its way, is the universal source material of ghost stories in many cultures. The *jiang shi* (literally, stiff corpse) is one of the Chinese archetypes for this notion of the unrested soul. First appearing in oral storytelling traditions, the *jiang shi* has been adapted into written poetry, ghost stories, and, more recently, cinematic screenplays. Over the years, their characteristics have been variously recreated and refined according to the specific demands and concerns of successive audiences. The variations between different portrayals clearly reflect the deciding role of the audience as the subjects of the *jiang shi*'s historical transmission. While many years passed when the Chinese vampire was dormant, almost forgotten about, it began to reappear in the 1970s as a connection between Eastern and Western traditions. The first *jiang shi* revival, in Hammer Films' *Legend of the Seven Golden Vampires* (Baker, 1974), marked the beginning of a new association between traditions of the Chinese vampire and those of the Western, through the British adaptation of Chinese mythology. After this parallel was drawn (perhaps one of the first associations of the *jiang shi* as a 'vampire' rather than simply a 'stiff corpse,' as it has more aptly been described), the *jiang shi* continued to be linked to Western notions of the vampire, though, in actuality, there are few similarities apart from its ability to speak to various societal concerns and cultural connections.

Referring to Ricky Lau's 1985 film *Mr. Vampire* as a "breakthrough, showing that the Hongkong [sic] cinema had at last digested all it could from Western vampire movies and that it was moving on to inject genuinely local Chinese sources of vampire folklore," Hong Kong film critic and artistic director for the Hong Kong International Film Festival Society Ho Ng suggests that the film was responsible for beginning a fad in Hong Kong and "constructing a cultural pattern for other vampire movies to follow" (31). In doing so, Lau's film places itself amongst a series of postmodern vampire films, which remove the traditional focus on the romantic, exoticized vampire, and instead de-mystify it so that vampirism becomes the result of some kind of mistake (medical experimentation, anthropological research, and, in the case of *Mr. Vampire*, improper burial). Likely a response to the British appropriation of the *jiang shi* for *Seven Golden Vampires* ten years prior, *Mr. Vampire* takes place shortly after the beginning of the British occupation of Hong Kong, making distinct references to its political situation. Furthermore, the combination of action, comedy, and horror in these films spoke to audiences who were in the midst of facing the impending 1997 Handover, when Hong Kong would be returned to China. The mixture of violence, humour, and fear in a fictional setting allowed audiences to project their internal concerns about the political situation onto an external, less realistic backdrop.

Yingchi Chu's 2003 book *Hong Kong Cinema: Colonizer, motherland, and self* reflects on the relationship between Hong Kong's political situation and local cinema. She notes: "Hong Kong film genres have developed in tandem with changes to Hong Kong's political, economic, and social environment" (67). Listing several examples of such changes, including the 1970s martial arts film, she argues that these films suggest: "violence is the only way of solving problems and releasing tension" (ibid). Moving into the 1980s, however,

a variety of comedy subgenres (including *Mr. Vampire*) ranked high at the box office, which Chu interprets as a sign of a new opportunity to release tension "in a safe manner" (68). Although these tensions were still far from disappearing, the changing dominant genre in Hong Kong suggests a certain willingness to accept these ongoing concerns and instead either address the issues in a 'safer,' more indirect manner, or find a form of escapism in the local cinema. In this sense, Hong Kong cinema is a pertinent source for the study of genre and its questioning of how fictional narratives are reflective of real-life situations, as these horror-comedy-action hybrids suggest. The use of Chinese legends of hopping vampires and other ghosts offered an opportunity for local audiences to face their fears of the impending Handover.

Offering a new form of Hong Kong cinema that drew further attention to Chinese-British relations, Sammo Hung's 1980 film *Spooky Encounters*, the precursor to the highly successful *Mr. Vampire* series, blended Eastern and Western traditions in a way that distinctly separated it from previous depictions of the undead onscreen. Widely considered the first cinematic depiction of Chinese vampires in Hong Kong, *Spooky Encounters* portrays the clumsy escapades of Bold Cheung (Sammo Hung) as he fights off (or, at the very least, tries to avoid) various types of ghosts. The film introduces both Bold and the ghosts in dream form – he has a nightmare about being chased – so when it finally cuts to Bold falling out of bed, frightening his wife with his cries, it is unclear whether we are expected to believe in the ghosts or assume they are simply imagined. This split between dream and reality continues to be vague in the scene that follows, when Bold's friends challenge him to visit a house they believe is haunted and perform a task that superstition claims could lead to something terrible if not completed successfully: Bold must sit in this house and peel an apple without breaking

the skin. The superstitious foundation is established a mere fifteen minutes into the film through this challenge. The camera cuts to Bold peeling an apple nervously, when a sudden clattering causes him to break the skin. At this point, the audience has more information than the protagonist, knowing that Bold's friends are trying to distract him. A ghost with a long tongue and fingernails suddenly jumps out, but Bold quickly recognizes the shoes and realizes his friends are playing a trick on him. The audience is able to breathe a sigh of relief here as it is suggested that the film does not actually believe in such an over-the-top portrayal of ghosts (its face covered in a thick layer of dramatic make-up), which is matched by Bold's own sigh of relief that he will not be attacked. Nevertheless, this reprieve is short-lived for both the audience and the protagonist, as the 'real' ghost appears seconds later looking just as outlandish as the first one. This, however, is only the beginning of a film heavily reliant on exaggerated portrayals of ancient Chinese legends about ghosts, demons, and other undead creatures.

While our familiar Western-style vampire is not at the forefront of this film, there are definite aspects that suggest Western influence, particularly from a vampire comedy of more than ten years prior, Roman Polanski's *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967). Not only does horror film writer Pete Tombs, in his book *Mondo Macabro: Weird and Wonderful Cinema of the World*, point out Polanski's influence on another Hong Kong filmmaker Tsui Hark's early work, he also cites *The Fearless Vampire Killers* as the source for the one of the staples of the Chinese vampire films: "the relationship between the wise master and his bumbling student" (32). Although this is not as predominant in *Spooky Encounters* as some of the later adaptations of the *jiang shi* tradition, it seems these films use the comedic plot of Polanski's relatively successful film to introduce a new kind of vampire figure. Additionally, Ho Ng

lists several other examples from *Fearless Vampire Killers* that are used in Hong Kong

vampire films, including comedic stunts like the victim trapping his head in steel bars; the

victim running in circles, thinking he has lost the vampire, when it suddenly pops out in front

of him; the victim managing to stuff something in the vampire's mouth just as he is about to

bite; and even the use of gay vampires to emphasize the distress in the already-uncomfortable

victims (34). Yet, although these very specific aspects may have been taken from Polanski's

film, the actual myths involved in the Hong Kong vampire films are still quite distinct.

A comparison between the background of the Chinese vampire legend and the more

familiar Western one helps highlight the significance of their differences in reading these

films as related to other postmodern vampire films. The portrayal of what the Chinese

imagine as the vampire is comparable to Western ideas of ghosts and even zombies, as these

hopping corpses are less focused on sucking blood and appear more like our creatures that

robotically rise from the dead with the sole intention of wreaking havoc on the living.

Contrarily, Western vampires tend to have a more specific agenda, which includes preying

on particular victims that fit into a more defined model – more often than not, this model has

much to do with a degree of sex appeal. Instead, portrayals of the *jiang shi* more closely

consider the Chinese superstition that an unsatisfied soul is likely to end up some kind of

ghost. Even though Chinese are just as likely as Westerners to roll their eyes at the ridiculous

portrayals of the undead that are found in films like *Spooky Encounters*, ghosts still occupy a

large part of the Chinese imagination and the *jiang shi* has come to be the most popular form.

The Chinese vampire is a corpse that has not decayed because its soul is unable to

depart for the other world until it is at peace. The soul can show itself in several different

forms, but if it still occupies a body, it becomes a hopping corpse, searching for a peaceful

release. In this mission, the most common characters to accompany the vampire are mourners who want their loved ones' souls to rest in peace, Taoists priests, and monks – both of whom tend to be well-versed in spells that can slow down the corpse, if not stop it altogether. When in action, the *jiang shi* is immediately recognizable by the effects of rigor mortis, as well as the Qing dynasty burial clothes it is dressed in. Unlike the daunting vampires of the West with their long black capes, the only frightening aspect in the appearance of the Chinese vampire is its unusually long fingernails, often blue, which are generally considered their deadliest weapon. Otherwise, these corpses tend to be more comical than serious, sometimes revealing long tongues hanging out of their mouths or eyeballs no longer secured in their sockets. Although the *jiang shi* are much like the Western vampire in their aversion to light – resulting primarily in nocturnal encounters – the other methods of defeating them tend to be more unique.

Unlike Dracula's attraction to blood, the *jiang shi* senses a human being by its breath; therefore, the best method to avoid a Chinese vampire is to simply stop breathing. Instead of garlic and mirrors, once one of these corpses has sensed a living being, it is essential to paste a talisman – a yellow strip of paper painted with a red spell – on its forehead. Other defenses include fresh chicken or dog blood, rice, and eggs. However, even though there always seems to be a Taoist priest around to offer this advice, the targets (usually the protagonists) in Chinese vampire films generally experience at least one failed attempt to quiet the unsettled soul, either through the sheer clumsiness of the priest's assistants or the inevitable mistaking of the right kind of blood, rice, or eggs. Usually it ends up being a combination of the two.

In *Spooky Encounters*, the good witch instructs Bold to get fifty eggs, four dog's legs and some dog's blood to protect himself from the ghosts (who are controlled through the

nemesis, a bad witch). However, in his clumsy state, Bold ends up getting a mixture of chicken eggs and duck eggs, even though the witch insists the eggs must come from a chicken, and we see him borrowing a cat from someone, which one can assume means he has gotten cat's blood instead of dog's. The witch instructs Bold to sleep on top of the coffin, and throw an egg in every time it begins to open. He tells him the fifty eggs should last him until sunrise, but if he runs out, he must throw the dog's legs and blood onto the corpse and then it will be unable to attack. However, Bold's failure to obtain the proper materials leads to the eventual escape of the corpse from its coffin to attack. Fortunately, he knows kung fu and is still able to defend himself.

Although the film's title implies a focus on the horror aspect, the predominance of the fight scenes, mostly involving kung fu, define it equally as an action film. Further, the involvement of Sammo Hung (as both leading actor and director) implies that comedy is a significant part of the film as well. The combination of kung fu and comedy was relatively new when Hung was making *Spooky Encounters* in the late seventies. Prior to this period, kung fu film may have had the occasional joke, but comedy only really became a focus of Hong Kong martial arts films after the death of Bruce Lee in 1973. Trying to break away from Lee's more serious focus on fighting and violence, Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan introduced a new kind of kung fu hero.[18] Even though characters still managed to come out on top, they were not the same hard-bodied action heroes that Bruce Lee had set himself up to be, instead presenting mishaps and defeats as a lead-up to the successful climax. Sammo

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[18] In "Hong Kong: Cinematic Cycles of Grief and Glory," Anne T. Cieko suggests that Jackie Chan defined himself against Bruce Lee's iconic image, noting how he "developed his trademark blend of comedy and kung fu in an (ultimately) internationally successful fusion of generic elements" (176).

Hung took this diversification even further by incorporating ghosts and other undead creatures to add a horror element to the existing hybrid of action-comedy.

This combination is emphasized in *Spooky Encounters* in the way Bold is teased for being frightened, but he is able to show off his kung fu skills in the end, which proves to be just as important in defeating the undead as the spells that are used by the Taoist witches. This blending of popular martial arts and traditional Chinese myth was well received in Hong Kong cinema and *Spooky Encounters* initiated scores of horror-comedy-action films depicting a mix of kung fu, vampires, and other ghosts. Countering questions of whether these legends were actually accepted in China or Hong Kong before the introduction of the popular *jiang shi* films following *Spooky Encounters*, Ho Ng's article "Abracadaver: Cross-Cultural Influences in Hongkongs Vampire Movies" presents evidence of several sources "awashed with vampire stories or stories of transformed corpses" from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) (32). This suggests that interest in hopping corpses and other types of vampires (Ho's list includes "flying corpses," "roving corpses," "prostrating corpses," and "corpses with bones that do not decay" [32]) has long been a part of Chinese culture, remaining in Hong Kong nearly a century after it had become a British colony. Still, he points out that *Mr. Vampire* really is "one of the first movies in the Hongkong [sic] cinema to make great effort in unearthing indigenous folkloric sources and incorporating them in the movies, thus starting a trend for other vampire movies to follow" (34). The *Mr. Vampire* series began in 1985 and ran through to 1992, with eight films in the franchise as well as spinoffs (*Vampire vs Vampire* [Lam, 1989]) and other films crediting *Mr. Vampire* as the main influence (*Magic Cop* [Lam, 1990], *Doctor Vampire* [Luk, 1991]). Though none of the sequels were as

successful, the original *Mr. Vampire* earned more than HK $20 million at the local box office (Tombs 34).

Much like *Spooky Encounters*, *Mr. Vampire* begins with a focus on Chinese mythology by introducing the stiff corpses in an attack against the Taoist priest's assistants. This allows for the priest (Lam Ching-ling[19]) to show off both his kung fu skills and his knowledge of Taoist spells in order to stop the corpses from dangerously hopping around the temple, arms and fingernails out and ready to kill. However, as the film progresses, it becomes clear that *Mr. Vampire* provides more substance than its predecessor. While it is much like *Spooky Encounters* in its offering of a fairly straightforward plot, basking in the still-new generic blending of comedy, horror, and action, *Mr. Vampire* also incorporates a more complex storyline. Taking place in a newly colonized Hong Kong, the film offers an early sign of concern for the future of the Special Administrative Region (SAR). Without making any explicit political references, jokes about the British influence on Chinese culture suggest a distinct sense of uneasiness about Hong Kong's status.

This relationship is highlighted in the subsequent introduction of the film's inevitable mourning characters, who are presented immediately following the initial corpse attack. Master Ko meets a grievant Mr. Tam (Ha Huang) and his daughter, Tina (Moon Lee), both concerned for the state of their father/grandfather's buried body, to discuss the corpse's burial at high tea. This is one of the few times in the film where the priest is seen lacking confidence – because he has never attended high tea before, he forces his assistant to accompany him to the meeting in an effort to look less pathetic. Appropriately, however, the

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[19] *Mr. Vampire* was responsible for typecasting Lam as the "one-eyebrow priest," appearing as the same character in two *Mr. Vampire* sequels and playing many similar roles in other films, including *Gambling Ghost*, *Spooky Encounters 2, Vampire Vs. Vampire*, and *Skin Strippess* (Logan 106).

bumbling assistant winds up drinking the cream separate from the coffee and later pouring

milk onto his tart, using his spoon to scoop it up. Both the priest and the assistant attempt to

hide their disgust at these English flavours, but Mr. Yam's daughter Tina, wearing a frilly,

English-style dress, takes a smug pleasure in their incompetence.

Dan's friend Harry faces a similar cultural disaster in the following scene when Tina

enters the cosmetic shop he helps run and he determines she is a prostitute. While the

audience already knows that she teaches make-up application, Harry lacks this information

and resorts to his own assumptions about the few occupations requiring makeup. The clash of

traditional and modern values is presented in situations like this throughout the film, where

we see a mocking of British influence on Chinese culture. The comic nature of the film,

however, urges viewers not to take this comparison too seriously, as it shifts between

mockeries of both cultures. Although most of the characters still represent the traditional, old

myths such as the hopping corpse cannot be taken any more seriously than the depiction of a

Chinese person pouring milk onto his tart.

The film continues to highlight its predominant interest in the contrast between

traditional Chinese and more colonial practices as Master Ko and Mr. Tam are shown at the

burial site of his father shortly after the incident at the English teahouse, trying to determine

how Tam Sr.'s corpse had an improper burial. Mr. Tam's recent misfortune in his business

determines that his father's soul failed to have a successful departure following his death. As

a result, Master Ko has Tam Sr.'s coffin removed from the ground, insisting that the body

will have to stay with him at the temple until they can find a better plot for it. Apologizing

for disturbing their father/grandfather, Mr. Tam and Tina agree. After giving a vast list of

superstitions to consider with regard to the upheaval and reburial (who exactly can watch the

digging, what direction it must be done, etc.), the plot of *Mr. Vampire* progresses, full of clumsy mishaps as the corpse comes back to life under the care of the Master and his assistant, and everyone works together to stop the vampire from attacking. Perhaps closest to Western mythology is the result of the stiff corpses' attack (minus their use of fingernails in place of fangs), which leads to the spreading of stiff corpses, potentially resulting in a whole chain of vampire-zombie-ghosts roaming the town, preying on anyone unable to defend their self. While *Mr. Vampire* limits the corpse count to a mere few, later films in the series, such as *The Mr. Vampire Saga* (aka *Mr. Vampire IV*, Lau, 1988) portray a much more aggressive spread of vampires as victims rapidly become enemies.

Much like the postmodern vampires of the West, Chinese vampire films do not romanticize or exoticize the undead. Although we may sympathize with the mourners in the film for the improper burial of their loved ones, it is next to impossible to relate to the hopping corpses because of their lack of emotion and expression (again, much like Western zombies in this sense); they are only alive enough to use their fingernails to violently attack. While side plots do suggest some romance between characters including ghosts, the vampires they are trying to defeat show no capacity for romance or love. Far from sexually appealing, hopping corpses are unable to disguise the fact that they have already died and begun to rot. The only appeal they may have is their occasional ability to do kung fu, but this is never as impressive as the film's heroes, who are ultimately more agile. Also similar to the recent de-mystified Western vampire films, which focus on vampirism as an illness, there is no mystery to the Chinese vampire. It takes mere minutes after the introduction of the stiff corpses at the beginning of *Mr. Vampire* to explain how they ended up this way. Although it may only be a myth, and therefore difficult to believe (though really no more so than any

Western vampire film), the film remains fairly straightforward in its treatment of the vampire

as the result of a mistake (improper burial), rather than the more exotic portrayal of Dracula,

who originated from legends of Vlad the Impaler, a bloodthirsty warmonger.[20]

One exception within the *Mr. Vampire* series is the second film, *Mr. Vampire II* (Lau,

1986), which is significantly more sentimental toward the vampires than the other films. Also

directed by Ricky Lau only one year after the first film, *Mr. Vampire II* introduces a family

of stiff corpses, discovered during some kind of archaeological dig executed by a greedy

professor and his assistants in search of materials to sell to museums. Unlike the first film,

this one takes place in modern day, with the discovery of what seem to be ancient corpses

allowing for consistency in the Qing Dynasty burial clothes they are wearing. The presence

of a woman and a young boy in addition to the male corpse (only male vampires appeared in

the original) immediately sets up a more emotional attachment to the vampires. When the

young vampire escapes in transit to a museum, his separation from his family becomes one of

the various plotlines running through the film. A little girl discovers the boy vampire (who

they nickname OK Boy) in the shed behind her house. Having just seen a news report about

illegal immigrants from Mainland China trying to enter Hong Kong via Vietnam, the little

girl decides he must be one of these "small human snakes," as the reporters call them, and

feels obligated to 'rescue' him. They quickly bond and the little girl introduces OK Boy to

her brother and friends. In an overly sentimental montage accompanied by 80s Chinese pop

music, the kids take OK Boy out on the town for an afternoon, disguised in an outfit not

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[20] Born in Transylvania in 1431, Vlad Tepes was given the name Dracula, after his father Vlad Dracul (the added 'a' indicating 'son'). His reputation as an "inhuman monster" came from his reported torture methods of skinning, boiling, and, most famously, staking. Other rumours claim he was known for eating the flesh and drinking the blood of his victims (AllSands.com, Vampires.be).

unlike the costume ET wears when Gertie and Elliott take him out for Halloween in *ET: The Extra Terrestrial* (Spielberg, 1982). And, much like this American film, the emotional implications of *Mr. Vampire II* peak when the little vampire is discovered and the children are told he will have to return to his family.

Though this is only one of the side plots to the other storylines of the film focusing on the horror-action-comedy aspect (portraying more of the violent vampires and kung fu that the original *Mr. Vampire* focused on), it speaks a lot to the Western influences at the time, not only in its outsider portrayal (the alienation theme is just as relevant in terms of pre-1997 Hong Kong as it would have been in the US in relation to racial prejudice, or family alienation, as seen in *ET*), but also in the more sentimental treatment of the vampire, reminiscent of the relationships between vampires and non-vampires in Hollywood films of the same period, such as *Near Dark* (Bigelow, 1987) and *The Lost Boys* (Schumacher, 1987). OK Boy, however, does not try to convert the children, emphasizing his innocence as a child vampire, as well as the sympathetic aspect of being treated like a foreigner in your own country – even though the children believe he is an illegal immigrant, OK Boy is actually more closely tied to his Chinese roots (assuming his Qing Dynasty apparel is representative of his origins) than they are, coming from a British-influenced Hong Kong.

Pete Tombs suggests that the confusion of OK Boy being a mainland refugee speaks to the Hong Kong psyche that conceived the Mainland as having a "fascinating but fearful allure" (37). A chapter in his book focusing on "Ghosts Galore" interprets these films as representative of the "troublesome spirits of China's past," despite dealing with them in a "jokey" way (ibid). But this was still a significant step forward. Tombs notes:

the previous generation of Hong Kong films had projected a very idealized and partial view of history. There had been almost no mention of the recent past, the Communist take-over in 1949 and the violent Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. One of the first direct references to recent mainland history in eighties horror films comes in the 1986 comedy *Haunted Madam*. (ibid)

With the introduction of films that could at least make light of the stressful situation they were facing, unsure of whether they were more British or Chinese, Hong Kongers took interest in this series as a means of easing their concerns through humour.

Still, the confusion about authenticity and Hong Kong's socio-political situation continues beyond the first two *Mr. Vampire* films. In *Mr. Vampire III* (Lau, 1987), there is direct reference made to Hong Kong's duality when one of the Taoist priests (Richard Ng) tells his two ghost friends that they must leave because the living and the dead cannot co-exist. In response, the elder vampire asks: "What about two countries, one system?" This is a direct reference to then PRC leader Deng Xiaoping, who proposed there could be one China running under two different policies – China could remain socialist, while Hong Kong and other separated areas (Macau, Taiwan) could operate under a capitalist system. This allowed for Hong Kong to retain its separate system for at least fifty years after its reunification with China. Although this concept is not pursued within the narrative of the film, the explicit reference to Hong Kong's political system is an undeniable effort to supplement the otherwise repetitive narrative of vampire-fighting priests and their disciples that is replicated almost unvaryingly throughout the series with something more socio-politically relevant. Most of these films take place long before this policy was introduced, however, which marks them as a self-aware attempt to address current affairs within the surreal world of vampires and other ghosts.

Not long after the *Mr. Vampire* series had proven successful in Hong Kong and other East Asian countries, other Hong Kong vampire films began to be created outside of the series. These films, however, did incorporate more of the Western tradition, including capes and fangs and an increased focus on adapting the Dracula legend. For example, the depiction of a Catholic church being built in Hong Kong in *Vampire vs Vampire* (Lam, 1989) sets up grounds for a comparison between Eastern and Western traditions through religion. Though this film most closely resembles a sequel to the original, the incorporation of Western vampires through the presence of the church allows for a more overt questioning of East-West relations. With the church come a group of European figures: Mother Superior, her group of nuns, and a Dracula-like figure, hiding within a room full of bats inside the church. The return of the little vampire from *Mr. Vampire II* marks another more sentimental example. Again a more sympathetic character than regular *jiang shi*, the little vampire helps the priest defeat the Western vampire. Although *Vampire vs. Vampire* was not as well-received as its predecessors, Dale Hudson argues that it, as well as two similar films, *Doctor Vampire* (Luk, 1991) and *A Bite of Love* (Shin, 1990), were in fact more telling of Hong Kong's political situation than those which made more of an effort to incorporate Chinese traditions.

In his essay "Modernity as Crisis: *Goeng Si* and Vampires in Hong Kong Cinema," Hudson suggests that *Vampire vs. Vampire, Doctor Vampire, and A Bite of Love* "pose questions about Hong Kong's crisis in a more urgent way than the *Mr. Vampire* films, moving from the spectrality of ghosts to the corporeality of vampires as the handover became more imminent" (204). While the more traditional *Mr. Vampire* films speak to the fact that *jiang shi* tend to turn up more during times of spiritual (or even social/political) imbalance,

Hudson closely considers the way the later films use the European/Hollywood vampire to turn Handover anticipation into "ambivalent anticolonial, antiforeigner, and anti-Christian narratives – ambivalent because they seem nostalgic for an era when different configurations of transnational (or perhaps even prenational) consciousness were still possible" (206). Hudson places *Vampire vs. Vampire* in the same category as *A Bite of Love* and *Doctor Vampire* because of their incorporation of the Western vampire. However, he suggests that, despite being Hong Kong films, the latter two are still more critical of both British and Chinese authority "rather than propose a definitive position" as *Vampire vs. Vampire* does by "expel[ling] the 'vampirism' of British colonization and Christian proselytism" (220). He highlights *A Bite of Love*'s reference to citizenship and contagion with the Hong Kongers being forced to carry their identification cards in London and the suggestion that blood contaminated with AIDS must come from 'foreigners,' as well as the association between blood contamination and cultural or national identity in *Doctor Vampire* in which the taste of foreign blood is presented as exotic and desirable. In comparison to the mythical focus of the earlier *jiang shi* films, the later films, which mix Chinese and Western vampire traditions, present a more physical crisis relating to the changes occurring in Hong Kong, pre-1997.

Just as discussions of Western vampires focus on the emergence of vampires at moments of crisis, Hong Kong has adapted both Eastern and Western versions of the vampire story to, at the very least, make reference to their own socio-political situation. Instead of disguising this concern with the erotic images more familiar to traditional vampire films, the earlier *jiang shi* films are more preoccupied with highlighting Chinese beliefs. In the newer films that Hudson discusses, particularly *Doctor Vampire* and *A Bite of Love*, the narrative is more reflective of the traditional Western vampire film because they not only take place in

England, but also portray Western vampires that suck blood and transmit their disease. Because these are comedies, however, they allow for a more self-conscious transformation into vampirism, with the main characters more critical of what is 'supposed to' happen to them.[21] Still, though the self-awareness of *A Bite of Love* suggests a more postmodern take on the vampire myth, the film supports the traditional values of the Western film by making the story overly sentimental in terms of the relationship between Anna and the vampire. While Hudson's interests lie in the fact that the later Hong Kong vampire films are more openly reflective of the material effects involved in the transformation of Hong Kong during the years prior to 1997, their lack of ghosts and kung fu leaves them with a less unique take on the vampire, which ultimately removes the appeal of the *Mr. Vampire* series that had come as a refreshing shift away from the endlessly regurgitated traditional vampire narrative of the West.

This background on Hong Kong's socio-political situation in the years leading up to their return to the PRC offers insight to the popularity of the postmodern vampire film. In place of the conventional exoticized or romanticized core, these films offer straightforward plots that individually speak to different aspects of the relationship between British and Chinese culture. In doing so, filmmakers such as Sammo Hung and Ricky Lau have attracted audiences who can relate to Chinese culture and identity, while not taking the political situation too seriously. In their article "At the Hong Kong Hop: *Mr. Vampire* Spawns Bloodsucking Genre," Hoover and Stokes point out that the tendency to combine Western themes with Chinese myth (as seen in the earlier comparison between *Fearless Vampire Killers* and the *Mr. Vampire* films) "convey Hong Kong's hybrid culture and the pervasive

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[21] In the case of *A Bite of Love*, this is informed by *Fright Night II* (Wallace, 1988).

anxiety of the population" (69). *Spooky Encounters*, the *Mr. Vampire* series, and even some

of the later films, such as *Vampire vs. Vampire*, all work to subvert the relentless narratives

now expected from vampire films that are more interested in the romantic appeal of the dark

and mysterious vampire, instead presenting a representation of Hong Kong as a modern,

British-influenced SAR, yet still deeply rooted in Chinese tradition.

CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSION

In his essay "The Poetics of Horror: More than Meets the Eye," D.L. White suggests that horror films should be looked at not only in terms of the sum of their parts, but by the way these parts are assembled (124). Although the postmodern vampire film is not exclusive to a single genre, its awareness of particular conventions is essential to the way it reassembles the traditional vampire film in order to create something new. Rather than adding up what exactly makes them vampire films – a monster figure with a craving for human blood and a sensitivity to light, gory feeding scenes, and so on – my selection of these films is informed by the way their respective directors have chosen to combine old conventions with original concepts of vampirism. This encourages viewers to reconsider different interpretations of the vampire narrative by reflecting not only on which aspects remain true to tradition, but also how the changes are developed as the focus of the film. In *The Addiction*, the reference to drug addiction is more overt than other vampire films attempting to tackle the same subject, while films like *Trouble Every Day* and *Thirst* consider vampirism as a side effect of medical experimentation. Finally, *Mr. Vampire*, while not set in present day, is highly relevant to the political situation of the film's creation time and place: 1980s Hong Kong, as tension was increasing prior to the return of the state to China.

In addition to their concern for contemporary social and political fears within their respective times and places, however, these films also warrant reflection on filmmaking practices in terms of their use of both narrative and stylistic techniques to move away from being generalized only as vampire films. Instead, these variations on the internationally

recognized influences of Bram Stoker's novel formulate important questions about the nature of being addicted to blood and the burden of this illness, as well as the way these situations can be portrayed from diverse perspectives. For example, *Let The Right One In* uses the melancholy invoked by the harsh Swedish winter to question whether the vampire is really as much of a monster as many of the humans in the film. Similarly, *Thirst*'s portrayal of the contraction of vampiric cells through a priest's sacrificial offering of his life to a medical experiment questions the contradictory feelings arising from religious devotion. Both Alfredson and Park's films pose these questions not only through their complex narratives examining human nature, but also through visual techniques such as graphic matches that create connections between the vampire as the typically evil character, and the humans who end up exhibiting much more drastic qualities. The lack of dialogue in these films emphasizes the visual significance of these comparisons between human and not-quite-human characters. In many ways, the postmodern vampire film creates a diverse vision of the sympathetic vampire protagonist by setting them up as miserable figures rather than highlighting their fatal habits and desires. In the final example, *Mr. Vampire*, the vampire returns to being the antagonist but in many ways other, human, characters are set up as embodying equally shameful characteristics, while the corpses, already mostly dead, lack the mental ability to control their evil behaviour.

While expectations of the classical vampire film reflect this latter example in that the vampire antagonist is set up in opposition to the hero who defeats him, each of the films being examined break the boundaries of the traditional narrative by restructuring the portrayal of the vampire so that it no longer revolves around the mystical foundation of its exotic supernatural powers and sexual appeal. Though the vampires in question are portrayed

as sympathetic, they avoid romanticization in their awkward and uneasy state: Kathleen in

The Addiction is too focused on trying to understand the nature of her addiction and human

existence to preoccupy herself with romance, while Sang-hyun in *Thirst* attempts to be

romantic, but fails miserably due to both his priestly and vampiric traits – he has never

touched a woman in his life, and now what he desires most is to lick her feet and sniff her

armpits. The stiff corpses of *Mr. Vampire*, as well, are placed within the film more for comic

relief than any kind of sexual encounter with the film's heroes, and are far from appealing.

Furthermore, lacking the opportunity to seduce with the traditional vampiric abilities of

shape-shifting and hypnotizing, vampires like Kathleen, as well as Coré and Shane in

Trouble Every Day, are left with only the burdens of their illnesses. Thus, by going against

audience expectations of the traditional vampire film, all of these examples offer a diverse

interpretation of what provokes viewers' continued fascination with the vampire figure.

Although they are much different from successful predecessors such as Tod

Browning's *Dracula*, *Interview with the Vampire*, or Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, the

triumph of many of these postmodern films has much to do with their renewed approaches to

the vampire narrative. For *Cineaste* writer John Calhoun, *Let the Right One In* as part of a

fairly recent group of films portraying child monsters is particularly noteworthy, while for

Morna McDermott and Tony Dasbit in "Vampires on Campus," it is the connection between

academia and vampirism in *The Addiction* that comes across as original. Accompanying the

scholarly approaches to these new additions to the vampire film canon, online reviews and

blogs point out their unique plays on generic conventions,[22] increasingly adult content,[23] and

the undefined portrayal of blood-sucking, particularly in *Trouble Every Day*, which leads

analyses to focus more on how they might be interpreted as vampire films than on any overly

cliché qualities.[24]

Furthermore, because none of these directors had released vampire films prior to the

ones being examined, it is not unlikely that the initial audience appeal also had much to do

with curiosity regarding auteurist style. As noted in my examination of *Thirst* in Chapter 3,

Park Chan-wook was already a critically acclaimed director both in South Korea and

internationally before the release of *Thirst,* and, therefore, success in the opening week of the

film was likely more relative to the filmmaker's fan base than interest in the film's content.[25]

Similarly, recognition of Claire Denis' work prior to *Trouble Every Day* drew audiences and

critics alike to make comparisons to the already well-known features of her films, such as a

focus on the male body (regularly contrasted by theorists with the majority of films which

objectify the female body) and a lack of dialogue, while debating the effectiveness of her

sudden turn to conventions of the horror genre.[26] Rather than attracting audiences through

their portrayal of the globally recognized rendering of the vampire, these films have found

success through both their unique content and their placement within the oeuvre of several

well-known filmmakers.

Yet, although they move away from the traditional narrative by offering sympathetic

vampire protagonists and distinctive additions to narrative and stylistic techniques, these

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[22] Online reviews of *Mr. Vampire* on sites such as LoveHKFilm.com, DigitalLard.com, and Kyonsi.com all draw attention to the film as a seminal contribution to the Hong Kong horror-comedy genre hybrid.

[23] "Thirst [Review]" by Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian,* October 2009.

[24] Notcoming.com, MetaCritic.com, Scene-Stealers.com.

[25] Particularly in South Korea, where vampire films were virtually non-existent prior to *Thirst*.

[26] "Textures of Terror"; "Looking for Trouble."

examples are still unquestionably descendents of the classical vampire film. *Trouble Every Day* and *The Addiction* avoid the use of the term 'vampire' altogether, while others, like *Thirst* and *Let The Right One In*, use it sparingly. In the case of *Mr. Vampire*, while the term is used in its English title, this is actually a Westernized interpretation of the literal translation from Chinese: 'stiff corpse.' Nevertheless, each of these films exhibits characteristics that were doubtlessly drawn from earlier vampire traditions. This is seen most explicitly in *The Addiction* when Kathleen is bitten on the neck and subsequently craves human blood, and in the recurring sounds of Eli's stomach rumbling and the successive images of the ring of blood around her mouth in *Let The Right One In*. Films like *Trouble Every Day* and *Thirst* present the same symptoms without the traditional cause: the former incorporates similar images of Coré's blood-smeared face, Shane's sensitivity to light, and the burning of Coré's body near the end of the film, and the latter also portrays a nocturnal protagonist who turns to ashes with the rising sun. Meanwhile, *Mr. Vampire*, far more connected to Chinese tradition than the Western one, still recognizes some traditional Dracula-esque features, such as the occasional glimpse of fangs and a focus on the victim's neck. These familiar features are essential to our understanding of what makes these vampire films postmodern – their acknowledgement of established conventions in order to subvert or reinterpret them in a unique manner.

While most recent work has focused on direct comparisons between contemporary vampire films (primarily the use of *Twilight* in comparison to any other selection), this grouping of specific postmodern examples takes the comparison further by considering which traits recurrently *stray* from the conventions. In Chapter 2, it is not the fact that *The Addiction*, *Let The Right One In*, and *Trouble Every Day* all depict protagonists that drink

blood and have a propensity to kill that is of particular importance to this study, but the way they all exclude such aspects as the mythical background story and the erotically mysterious vampire in order to present a more realistic figure, burdened by the weight of his or her intense desire for blood. Chapters 3 and 4 more closely examine these differences by considering how the films in question fit into their particular social and political situations. *Thirst* works with Park Chan-wook's oeuvre of graphically violent films, yet also shows how the director has opened up his global perspective by incorporating not only a Western myth but also references to Asian, European, and African culture within its narrative. Furthermore, because Korea does not recognize a vampire figure within their own cultural traditions, this adaptation is a unique one, marking one of the first depictions of vampires in Korean cinema. Similarly, the situating of *Mr. Vampire* within Hong Kong cinema can be easily interpreted as a representation of East and West conflicts between China and England, but its introduction of the horror-comedy genre also speaks to the audience expectations of the time, with this new hybrid providing a lighter reflection on current political tensions.

Just as Jameson argues that the shark in *Jaws* should not be read as a symbol of an exclusive message, the postmodern vampire provokes readings not only of what the vampire stands for in and of itself (drug addiction, AIDS, sexuality, foreignness), but as a multiplicity of signs that cannot be determined by any single viewer. A negative review of *Thirst* on FilmSchoolRejects.com notes that the film, "us[ing] vampirism as a metaphor for longing," ultimately fails because it spends too much time emphasizing the symbolism without developing a coherent story. From a postmodernist perspective such as Jameson's, however, this reviewer puts too much of his own experience and expectation into the film. Influenced by the recurring case of the vampire as a symbol for some kind of societal fear, from this

perspective, the film ends up with a single purpose in which, like Jameson's shark example, the vampire can only be read as the latest incarnation of Leviathan, ultimately focusing solely on the myth aspect of the narrative (Jameson 35). Instead, the shift in the postmodern vampire film away from these narrow interpretations is marked in its usage of the vampire as the sympathetic protagonist so that, moving away from its mythic origins, it is not reduced to a single metaphor for anxiety over the outsiders of society.

With this in mind, the postmodern vampire film offers viewers the opportunity to move away from the cliché stereotypes of the classical vampire narrative outlined above. In their place, we now have a wider range of interpretations of the bloodsucking figure, allowing for a reexamination of the monstrous other. With all the films under consideration having been released within the past three decades, it is highly likely that amongst the *Dracula 2000*s (Lussier, 2002), *Van Helsing*s (Sommers, 2004), and other more traditional adaptations of the near future, there will emerge at least a handful of postmodern variations, offering a break in the monotonous romance and heroism of the mainstream narratives.

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